gameinformer®

ORL EO GAME MAGAZINE

NAME	**Emily**
OCCUPATION	**Game Streamer**
GENRE	**RPG**
HANDLE	**ValkyrEmily00035**
FAV PRO PERK	**ALL**

IF KNOWLEDGE IS POWER, SHE'S A PARAGON.

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The Winds Of Change Blow At The Electronic Entertainment Expo

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
@GI_AndyMc

As we approach E3 2019, you can already feel the effect of Sony's withdrawal. For those who may have missed the news, Sony backed out of attending E3 this year – no press conference or booth around the event. I've commented on this before, and while I feel this move has some risk, I believe it is a bump in the right direction that E3 needs.

From conversations I have had with developers and publishers, it sounds like the transformation has already started, helping move E3 toward more focus on being a consumer show, which I believe is good for the attendees and the game community that is now a big part of the event's allure.

Yes, big publishers, like Bethesda, Ubisoft, and Microsoft, will still have press conferences (and I have to believe Nintendo will deliver one of its signature Directs), but I think the show floor itself will see more transformation toward fewer games, putting focus on giving people more access to those games through demo stations or more entertainment focused interactions.

I wouldn't panic, as there will still be plenty of games revealed at the show. Though, maybe not as many as we have seen in the past. Publishers are beginning to realize that the arms race of E3s past may not have been as good for them or the gamer. Or at least that is my hope, as I feel the writing has been on the wall for years where too many amazing games found themselves unable to escape the shadow cast by the biggest blockbusters. Sometimes change is difficult, but in the end, if E3 can become more focused, I think it will give more games a chance at success in the long run because the category is crowded enough without piling all our news into one month.

One last note, before you journey into the issue. We have a lot of fascinating features in Connect this month. News on the next PlayStation (pg. 12) and the upcoming Star Wars game from Electronic Arts (single-player with no micro transactions even! – pg. 14). A look at the challenges and advantages of game streaming (pg. 28), a hilarious look at manipulating the system in the mobile games space (pg. 22), and a lot more. We also have our cover story on Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3 (pg. 42) and an exclusive feature on Man of Medan (from the creators of Until Dawn – pg. 54).

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

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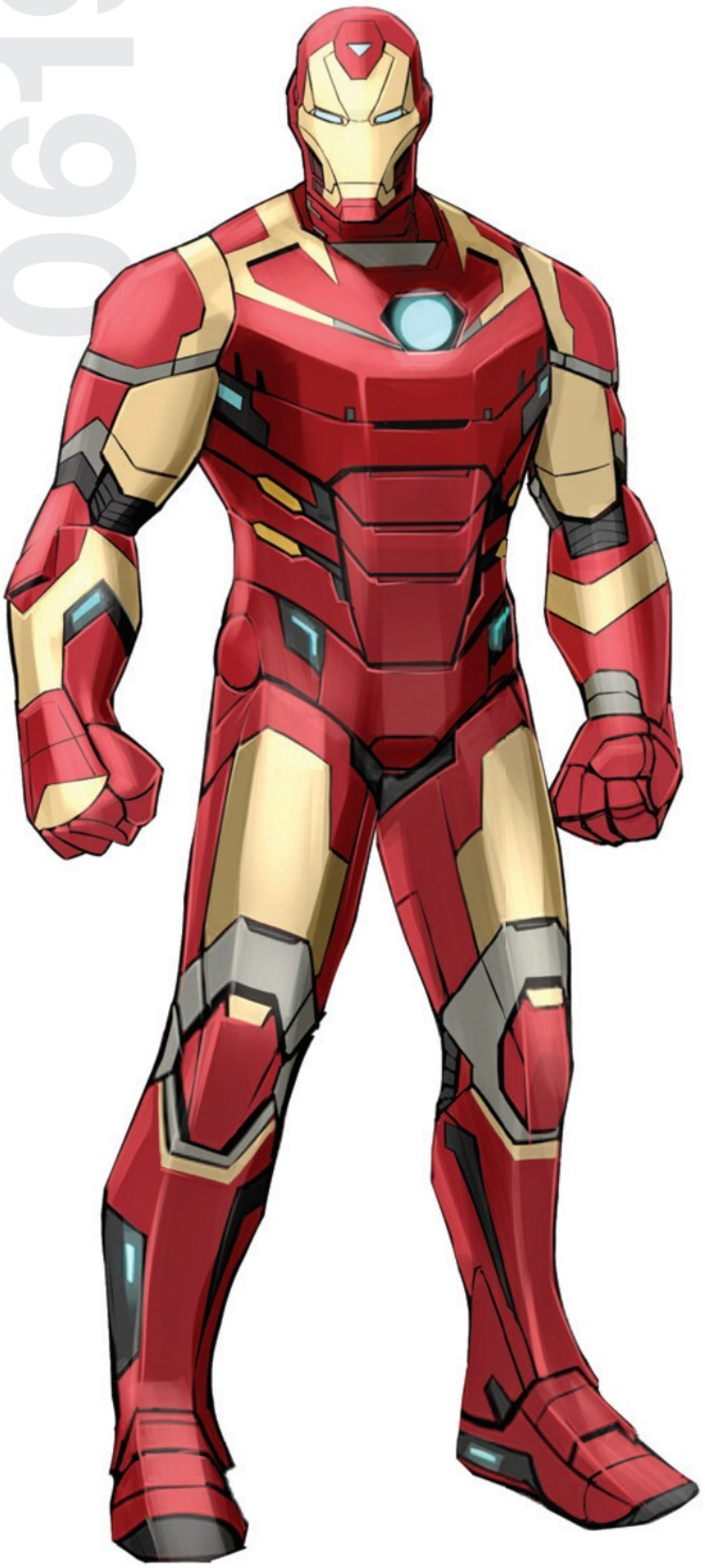
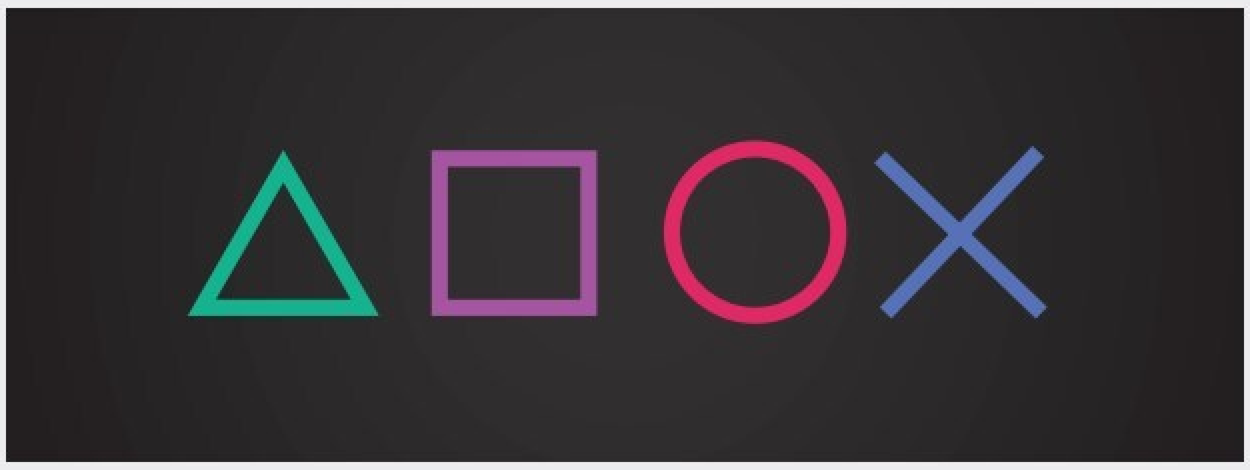
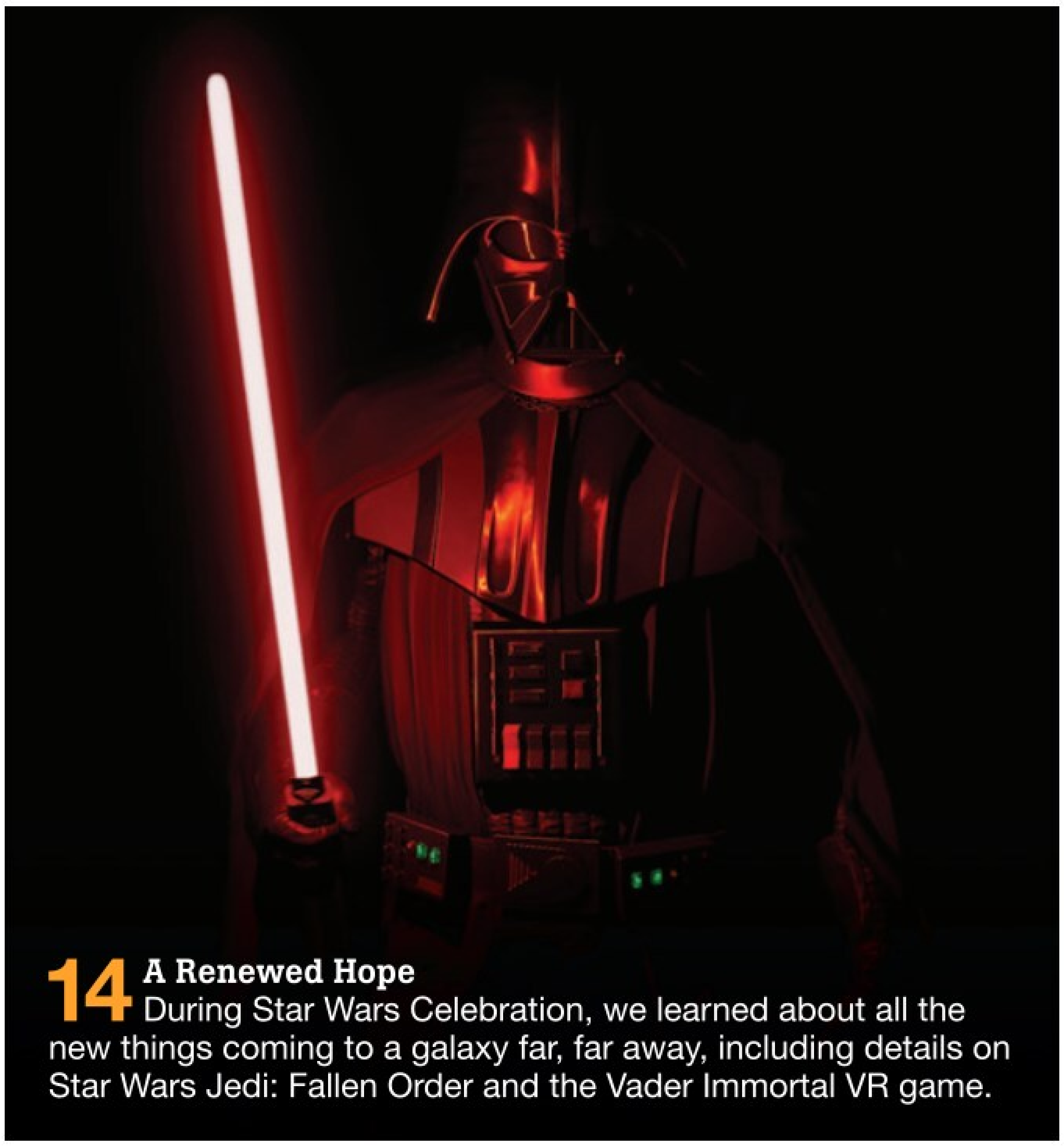


42 Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order

The fan-favorite team-up action/RPG returns, this time as a Switch exclusive. We traveled to Nintendo's North American headquarters to play with some new characters and get a glimpse of the game's expansive endgame loop. ***by Matt Miller***



12 **The Next PlayStation**
Sony offers a peek at its powerful next console.



14 **A Renewed Hope**
During Star Wars Celebration, we learned about all the new things coming to a galaxy far, far away, including details on Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order and the Vader Immortal VR game.

22 **A Flood In The Market**
A pair of developers gamed the Google Play market and found success in the most unlikely way possible – by releasing hundreds of bad mobile games.

19 regions
58 zones
200+ countries & territories

28 **Is Streaming The Future For Gaming?**
The promise of online game streaming is exciting… but we're not sure it will actually work.

06 **Feedback**

20 **Bringing Pixar Worlds To Kingdom Hearts III**

34 **Afterwords: The Walking Dead: The Final Season**

35 **The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly**

37 **Gamer: The Perfect Run**

38 **Gear: Marvelous Toys**

40 **Top Ten Inside Monsters**

41 **Timeline**

60 **Previews**

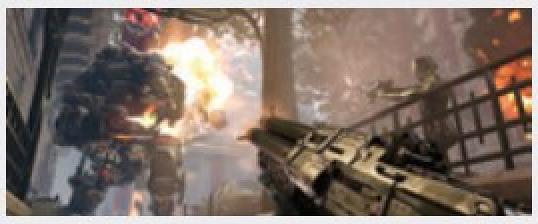
80 **Reviews**

94 **Classic: Remembering OnLive**

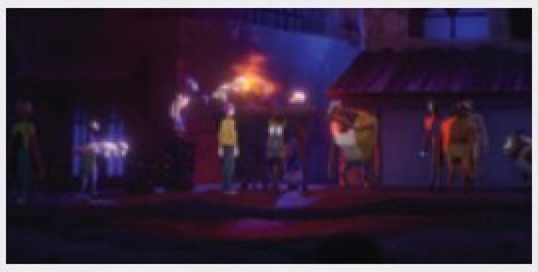
96 **Game Over: Video Game Greetings Crossword Puzzle**

54 **The Dark Pictures – Man Of Medan**
We visited Supermassive's studio to play and learn about its true Until Dawn follow-up.

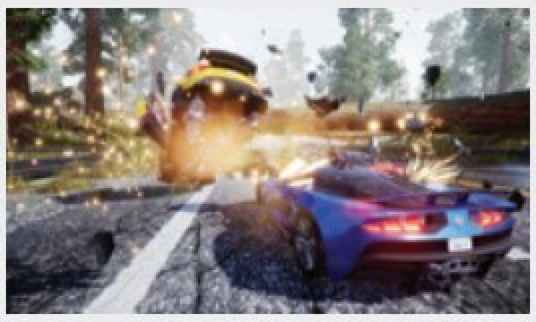
60 **Borderlands 3**
The much-teased Borderlands sequel is official! Here's everything we know.



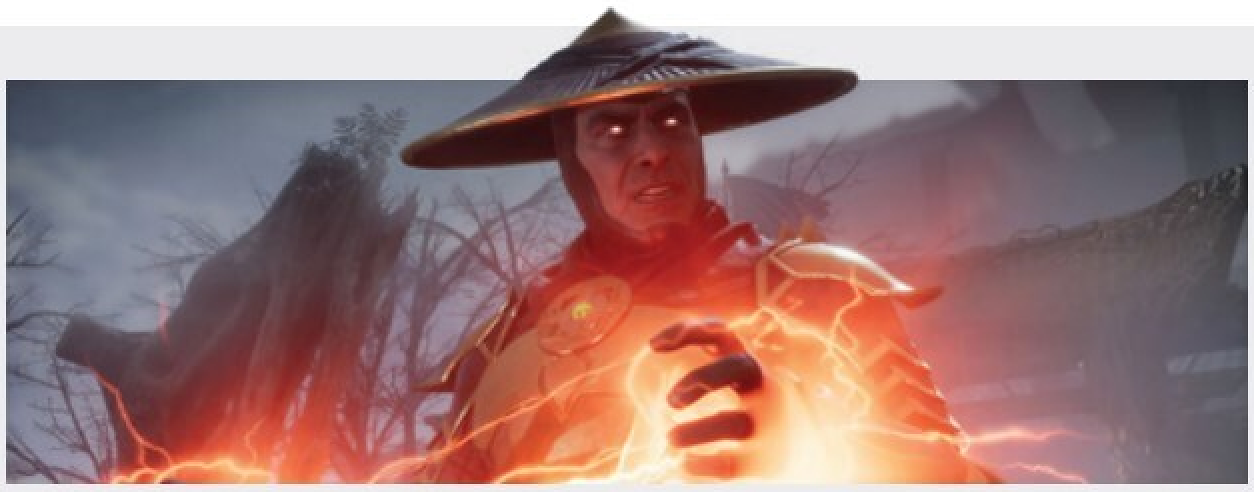
62 **Wolfenstein: Youngblood**
It's not MachineGames' Wolfenstein III, but there are plenty of reasons to be excited about this new cooperative entry.



73 **Afterparty**
The Oxenfree creators' next game sends you to hell for a high-stakes drinking game with the devil.



83 **Dangerous Driving**
The Burnout spiritual successor is, unfortunately, not all we hoped it would be.

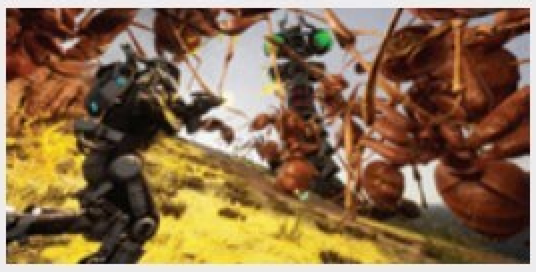


84 **Mortal Kombat 11**
NetherRealm's latest Mortal Kombat entry is bombastic, insane, and most importantly – fun.

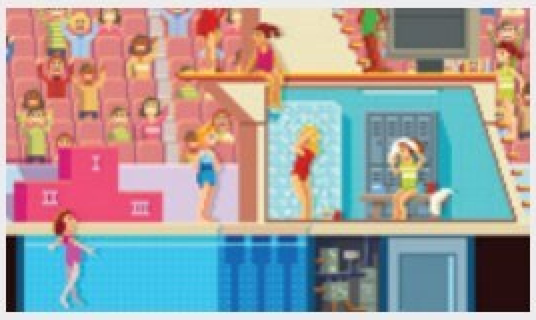
86 **World War Z**
The game based on the movie based on the book is a surprisingly fun entry in the Left 4 Dead-inspired genre.

88 **Days Gone**
Are we officially tired of zombies, or has Sony Bend done something exciting with its biker apocalypse?

89 **MLB The Show 19**
After striking out last year, MLB The Show once again finds its home run swing.



90 **Earth Defense Force: Iron Rain**
Iron Rain is EDF's biggest swing at trying something new in some time, and it's good (but it's still EDF).



87 **Photographs**
The latest game from the creator of 10000000 is different, but it's worth experiencing.

games index

Afterparty	73
Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey	64
Atomicrops	36
Baba is You	92
Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night	72
Borderlands 3	60
Concrete Genie	69
Dangerous Driving	83
Dark Pictures – Man of Medan, The	54
Days Gone	88
Divinity: Fallen Heroes	66
Earth Defense Force: Iron Rain	90
Generation Zero	92
Heaven's Vault	92
Hindsight 20/20	75
Hypnospace Outlaw	92
Iron Man VR	67
Journey to the Savage Planet	77
Katana Zero	92
Kingdom Hearts III	20
Levelhead	79
Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order	42
Mechstermination Force	92
Mistover	78
MLB The Show 19	89
Mortal Kombat 11	84
My Time at Portia	92
Night Call	36
Operencia: The Stolen Sun	92
Photographs	87
Planet Zoo	70
Sinking City, The	74
Star Renegades	36
Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order	16
SteamWorld Quest: Hand of Gilgamech	91
Telling Lies	71
Trover Saves the Universe	68
Vacation Simulator	82
Vader Immortal	17
Walking Dead: The Final Season, The	34, 85
Wanderer, The	78
Warsaw	76
Wolfenstein: Youngblood	62
World War Z	86

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feedback

Parody and reality collide this month as readers grapple with the many, totally real exposés found in this year's Game Infarcer.

Fool Me Once…

Game Infarcer (issue 312) got me good this year. When I opened the magazine the first thing I saw was the Fallout: New 76 "review." I got excited – while turning it into New Vegas may not be the best direction, I like the idea of re-releasing it as a product that, I don't know, is good? Even after realizing it's a parody, I still hope it happens. After all, April Fools' jokes sometimes become actual games, so there is a chance. Heck, Tetris as a battle royale sounds like an April Fools' joke, and it turned out to be the only BR game I'm willing to play.

Dustin Brau
via email

I was reading my latest issue of G.I. when my eyes flew to "Fallout NEW 76." I was so pumped by the prospect that they fixed my beloved series! I devoured the review thinking, "Man, it looks like they are going back to what worked before – smart!" Each paragraph recreated Fallout 76 into something familiar, not this unrecognizable game Bethesda gave us. My excitement waned as I finished the last sentence and reality kicked proverbial egg on my face. I then laughed out loud at my own desperation, wondering if that was the point of the article. Well played, Darth.

Lee Harris
Reno, NV

Surprisingly enough, it appears the fake-news era has somehow made readers even more gullible to Game Infarcer's audacious offerings, as we received plenty of letters from angry and confused readers. It's been a few years since Infarcer's bounty was so plentiful, so let's dive in!

Everybody Loves Darth

In response to "Darth" Clark's ego-inflated shill piece on microtransactions, I don't know if you're out of touch or just bought and paid for by publishers who want people to be okay with being screwed. Gamers aren't mad about extra content; that's such an obvious corporate tactic to justify bad behavior. They're mad when a game has paid DLC before it even launches. Also, pay-to-win isn't survival of the fittest, it's extortion and lets players who suck surpass people who are actually good. Pay-to-win players (I'm guessing you're one since you're defending them) are the weakest and most sad of all gamers. Overall you're just a pompous and arrogant juvenile, who apparently has no business in a grown-up gaming environment. Did mommy and daddy pay for your job there? How about siding with real gamers and leave the corporate shilling to professional suck-ups.

Anonymous
via email

So what's up with that pompous a-- of an editor-in-chief, Darth Clark? I just finished reading your last magazine and it was great until that point. His "enlightened" opinion is so one-sided and ignorant. Dude sounds like such an a--clown that I couldn't help but rant. I don't know who paid him to write that but he legit insulted every gamer with his bullsh--. The guy really believes his opinion is the only right one. And his photo of a grown man in a choker really let me down, knowing he has such a high role in your company. Good luck with that dude; you guys need it.

Anonymous
via Instagram

Darth Clark's opinions may be horrifically unpopular and insulting, but they get people talking – and at the end of the day, isn't that what really matters? Based on the sheer number of replies this year, Darth clearly deserves to give himself another raise!

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Star Woes

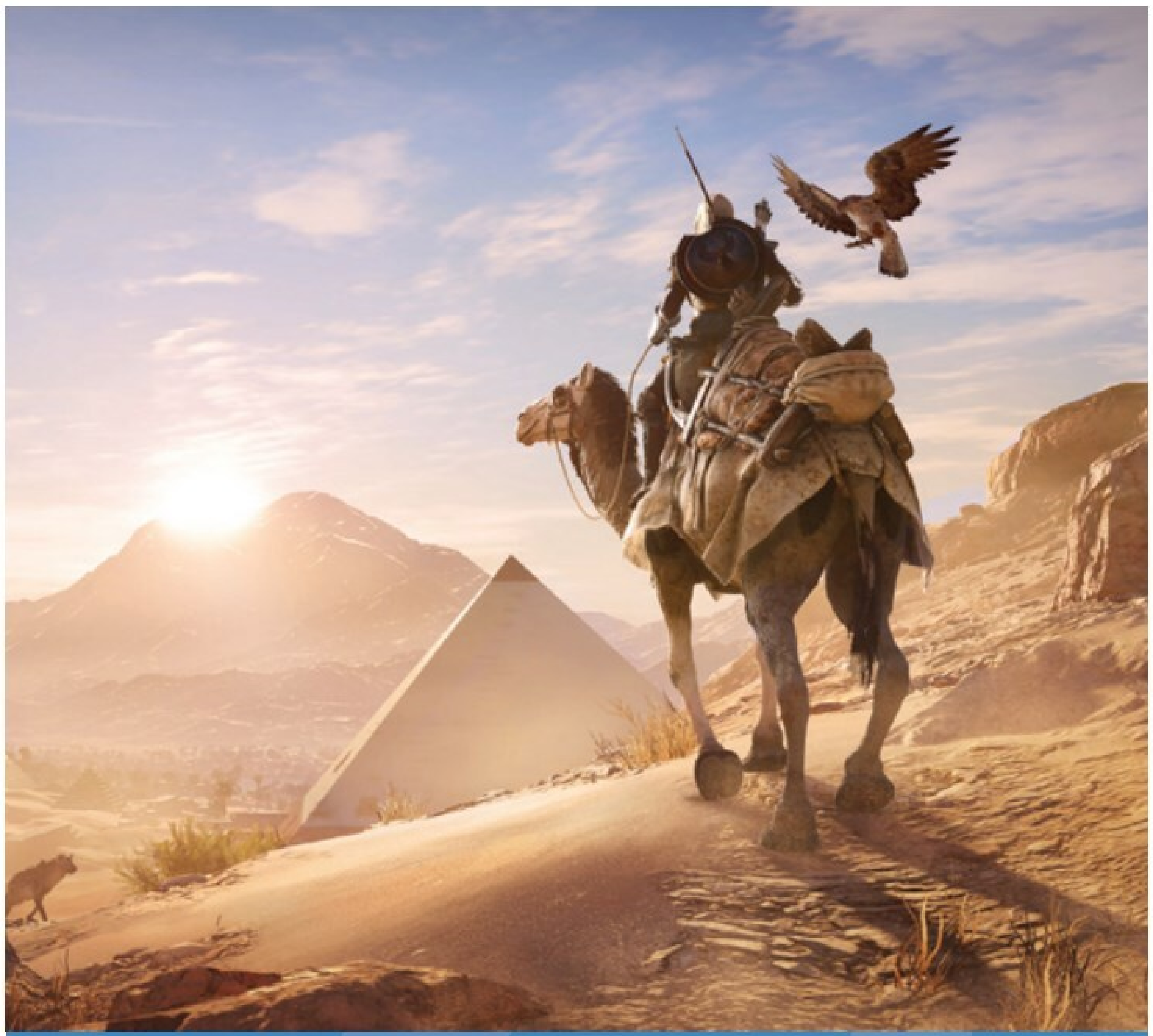
I just read the article on EA's canceled Star Wars game, and I honestly don't get the decision. They canceled it when it was 80-percent complete(!) because the story was too good and too satisfying to make into a series? Then don't make it a series, which would probably decline in quality as the games went on anyway! Just make it an awesome standalone Star Wars game that people will love. That would make them more profit than canceling altogether, and it would be satisfying from a creative standpoint for all the effort they put in.

Chani Elkin
via email

I loved EA games when I was younger, before you had to buy extra content, pay for EA Access, and buy even more extra content. This new canceled Star Wars game sounded so cool. I'd love a KOTOR-like game with modern graphics! What really gets me is Andrew Wilson saying they canceled it because they had a hard time incorporating loot boxes. Are you kidding me? What is with every game needing loot boxes these days? There weren't loot boxes in any of the games I played growing up. I know 13-year-old squeakers love that nonsense, but if you won't play a game without loot boxes, you need to reevaluate your life. I feel a little better now. Keep up the good work!

Landon Neilson
via email

It appears the only thing readers hate more than EA's actual handling of the Star Wars license is EA's fictional handling of the Star Wars license. Which, fair enough?



A Mystery From History

I've been waiting months for folks to call you out for saying Assassin's Creed Odyssey is the earliest chronological entry in the series in your Afterwords interview (issue 309), but there hasn't been a peep. My recollection of history is the Egyptian empire predated the Greek empire by 2000 years. I even double-checked; sure enough, the Egyptian First Dynasty was approximately 2900 BC, while Archaic Greece is circa 900 BC. So how is Odyssey the first entry? And why call it Origins if it isn't where the whole thing originates?

Chet Decker
via email

Your recollection of history isn't wrong, Chet, but your underlying assumptions are. While Egypt's First Dynasty did indeed run from 3150 BC to 2890 BC, it wasn't the only dynasty. Origins takes place in the late Ptolemaic period in 49 BC, which is why you've got pyramids and sphynxes to climb on. Odyssey takes place during the Peloponnesian War in Greece's Classical period, in 431 BC. That doesn't explain why "Origins" isn't the first in the series, but we didn't name them, so don't blame us!

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"If I had evidence of rampant cheating in FIFA games, would you want it?"

Our refereeing career ended in disgrace years ago, so no.

"Why do all my friends think Nintendo sucks?"

It's probably an unhealthy mix of psychological projection and herd mentality.

"OMG, Spiderpig is REAL?!"

It's Spider-Ham – show some respect!

Question Of The Month:

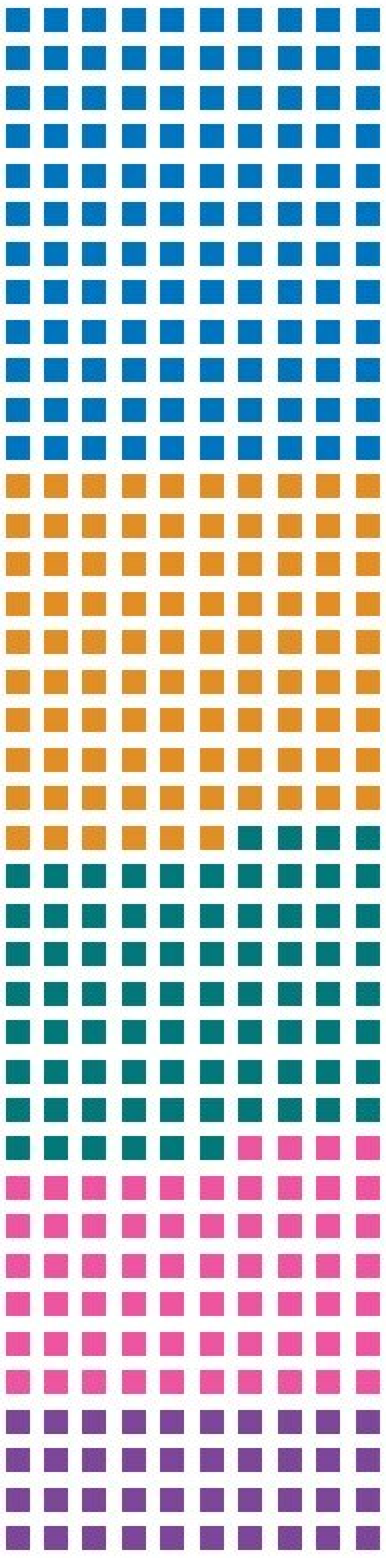
From reader Michael Frederick: What game would you send back in time to blow your young child mind?

gi spy

(Left) We infiltrated Nintendo's headquarters this month to learn all the secrets behind Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3. Get the full briefing on page 42.
(Right) Ben Hanson got into a two-player battle royale with Brendan "PlayerUnknown" Greene at this year's GDC.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Real-life Power-up Picks
- 🟧 Darth Clark Rebuttals
- 🟩 Fallout New 76 Haters
- 🟥 Fallout New 76… Fans?
- 🟪 R.I.P. Telltale

You Have The Power!

In issue 312, we asked readers what video game power-up they'd like to have in real life. A disconcerting number of respondents based their choices on smiting their "enemies," but kudos for replying nonetheless.

Keep your magic, teleportation, and other mundane super powers. I choose to be the ultimate immortal by copying the most enduring character of all time: the essential NPC. Try to kill me – I dare ya!

Paul Hirsch

I'd want Morgan Yu's Neuromod abilities from Prey. You can go from hacking a computer, to shape-shifting into a coffee cup, to becoming an engineer with no experience, and then turning into a coffee cup again! The possibilities are endless!

Cade Smith

I want whatever juice the Animal Crossing villagers are drinking that lets them carry dressers, fridges, and queen-sized beds in their pockets. That'd make moving so much easier!

Carly Prowdley

I would love to have Kirby's ability to suck up anything that comes my way. Plus I'd be able to find out the science behind Kirby's freaky insides. I mean, he's literally a stomach with shoes and eyes.

Isaiah Alexander

I just want the power of flight. I remember having a dream where I was Batman and I was gliding around like in Arkham Knight. It felt so amazing that I was really sad when I woke up.

Sean Gelish

If I could choose a super power, I would copy Scorpion from Mortal Kombat. I fell in love the first time I heard him yell "Get Over Here!" and have been a massive fan ever since. I might also yell "Get Down Here!" or "Bring That Here!" but I imagine people might run away when the kunai comes flying out of my hand.

Jeremy Amacher

(Left) Hanson also got way too close to Shuhei Yoshida's face. Give Shuhei some breathing room, Ben! **(Right)** Meeting back up with Sean Murray to discuss the continued development of No Man's Sky was a mind-blowing experience. Is that meme-y enough for you?

(continued on page 10)

FLIP THE RAINBOW
Skittles
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gallery

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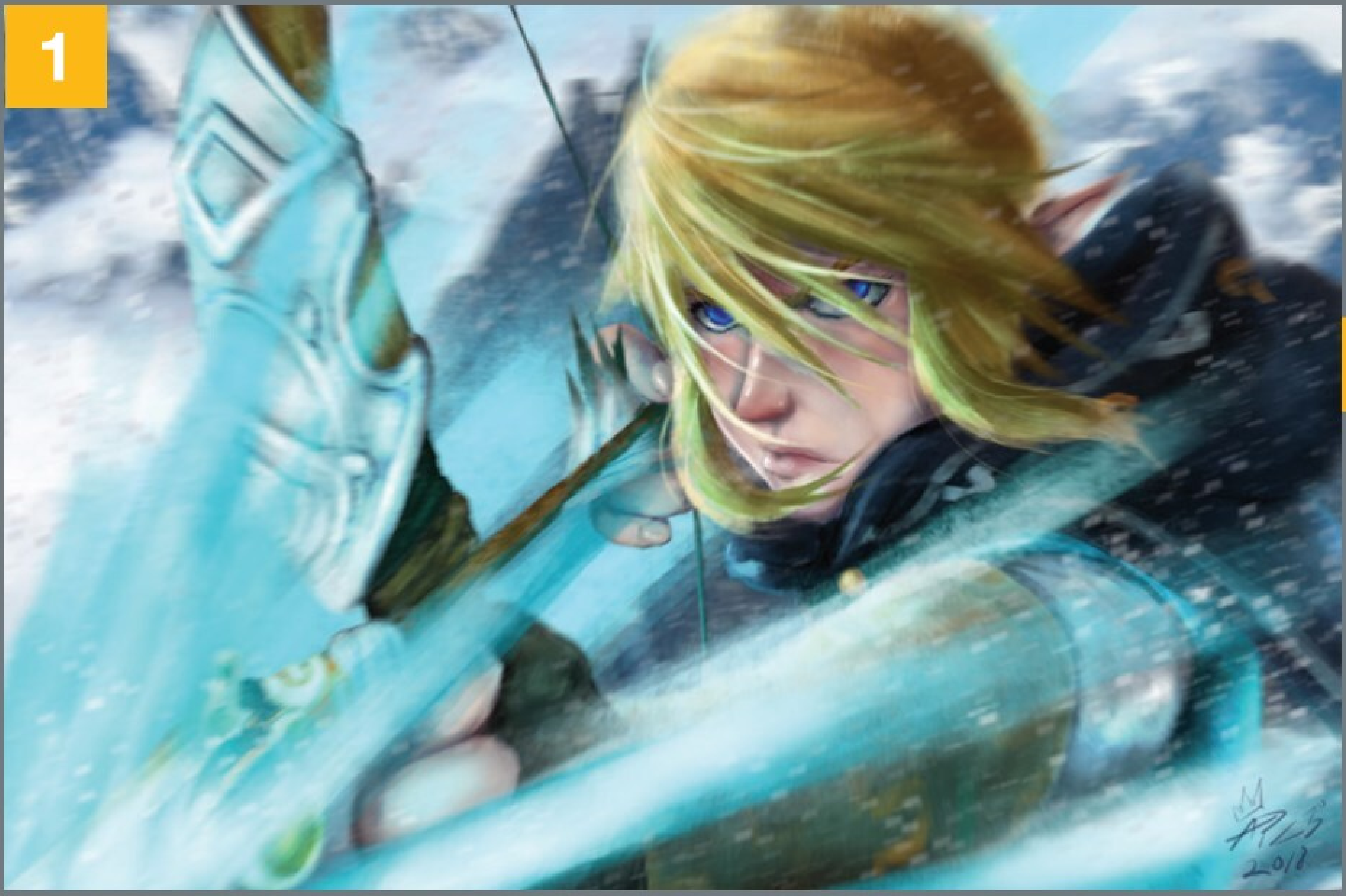

WINNER

1 Alex P.
Not that we're advocating man buns or anything, but how can Link even aim with all that hair in his eyes?

2 Ana Liceaga
We've all been there, amiright?

3 Andy Parks
… Is Olaf hanging off of Wreck-It Ralph's armpit hairs?

4 Jordan Watson
Seriously, you can't beat the cuteness of kid art!

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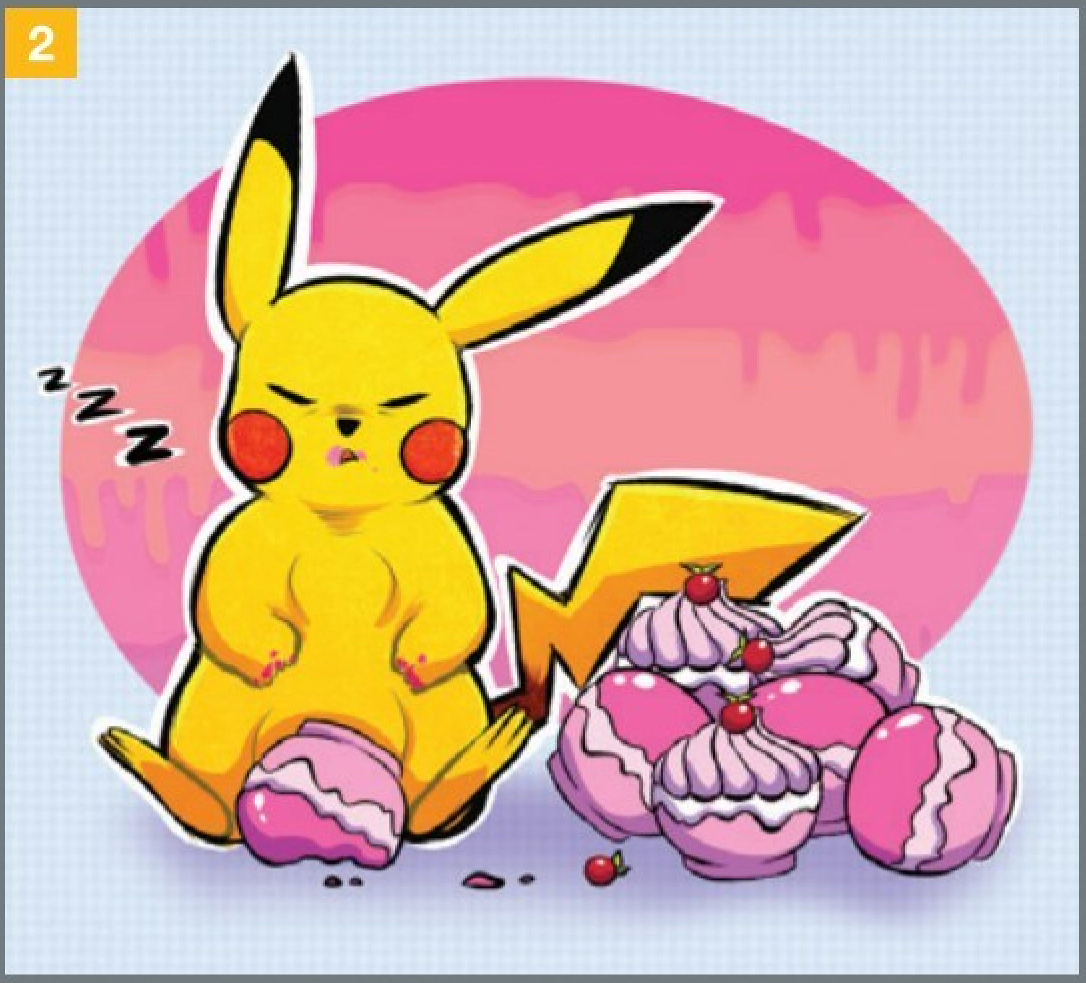

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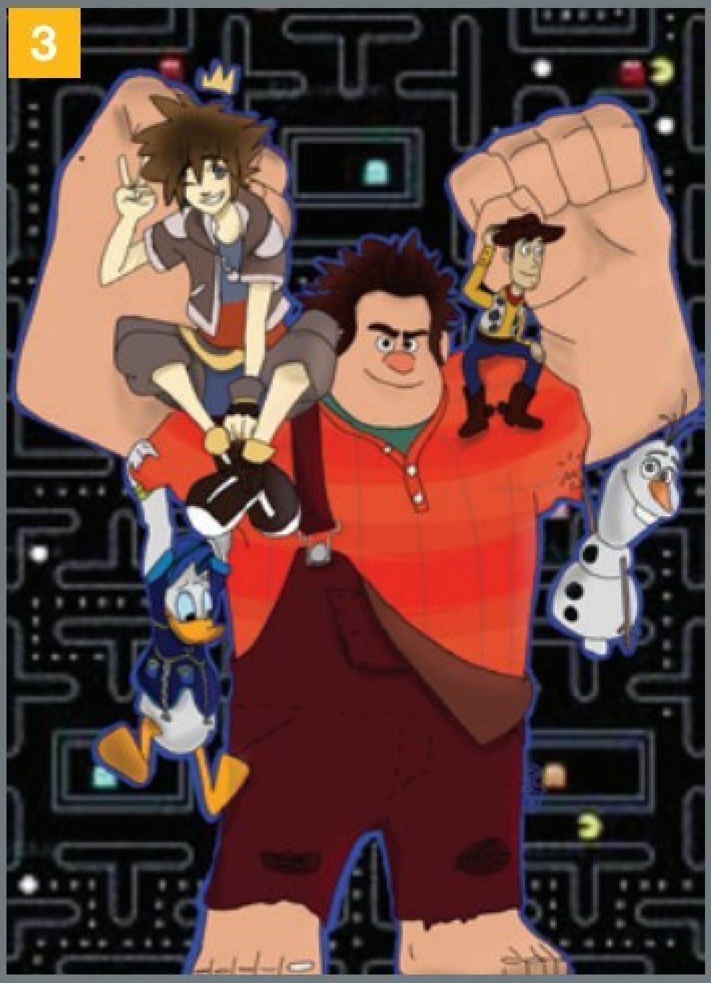

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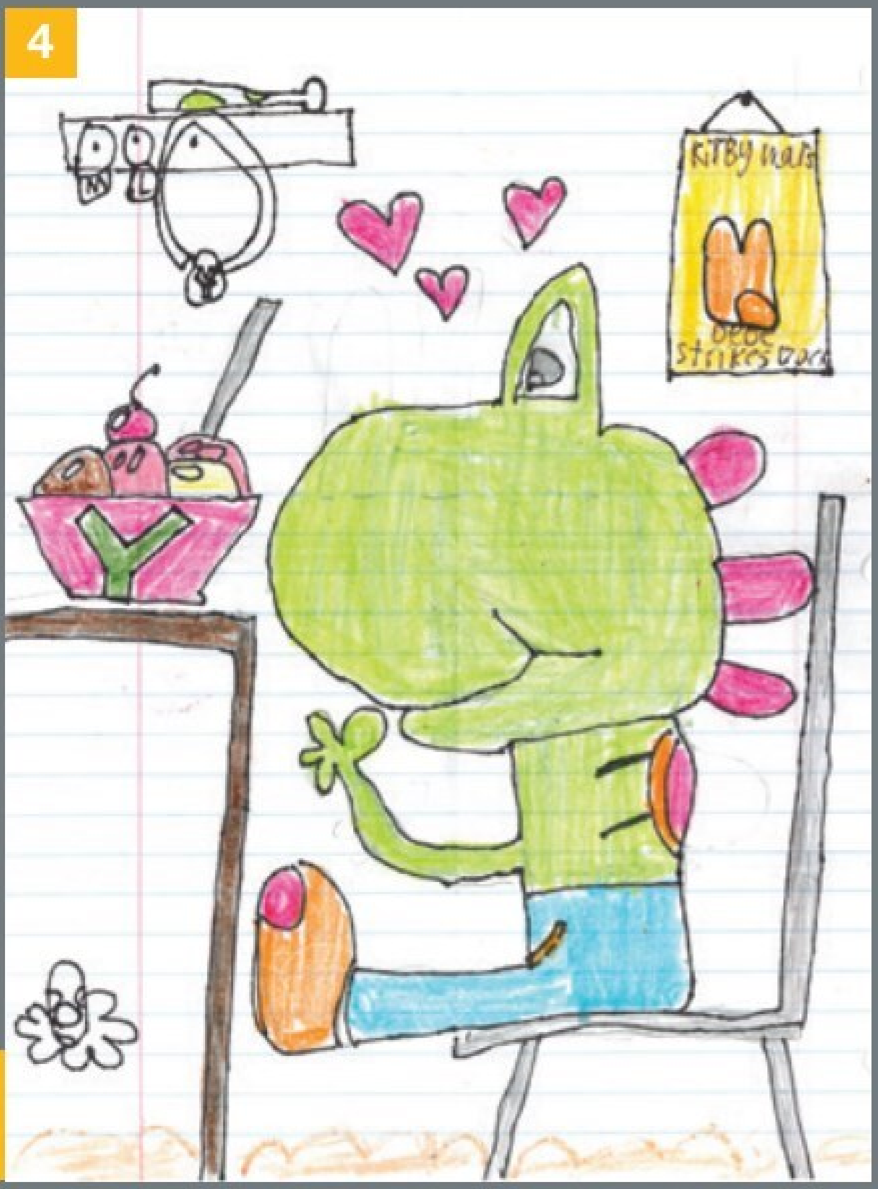

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(Left) Elise got in touch with her inner primate while checking out Ancestors with Panache Digital founder Patrice Désilets. **(Right)** This month we say goodbye to three superb interns: Jason Guisao, Hunter Wolfe, and Nathan Anstadt. Thanks for all the hard work, guys!

ANCESTORS
THE HUMANKIND ODYSSEY

WE ALL HAVE

THE POWER

Pearl, childhood cancer survivor; and Arnold, leukemia survivor.

TO STAND UP

TO CANCER

Lori, breast cancer survivor.

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Pictured: Heroes from Marvel Studios' *Avengers: Endgame.*
Survivor photos by Kevin Lynch.

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THE NEXT PLAYSTATION

Sony reveals promising first details of its next-gen system

by Jeff Marchiafava

Next-gen console rumors and rumblings are always swirling around the video game industry, but it takes something official to make waves. In an exclusive sit-down with *Wired*, Sony churned the waters by unveiling the first details of its next PlayStation console. While their chat focused mostly on technical power – no boomerang-controller unveils or next-gen game announcements – Sony still revealed plenty of information for gamers to get excited about.

Just as with the PlayStation 4, renowned designer and producer Mark Cerny is serving as the lead architect of Sony's new system, which he refrained from calling PlayStation 5. However, Cerny definitively confirmed the new console isn't another half-step improvement like the PlayStation 4 Pro. Sony has been working on the system for the last four years, and its computational power marks a significant improvement over any system currently on the market.

Sony is once again tapping AMD for its expertise in chip design. Cerny claims the next PlayStation's vastly enhanced CPU and GPU support up to 8K resolutions and ray tracing, a rendering technique used to create highly realistic visual effects by simulating the way light bounces off and interacts with objects. The new system also sports a custom 3D audio chip for more immersive, positional sound.

The next PlayStation's most impressive feature thus far may be its hard drive. Cerny says the new system features a cutting-edge, solid-state drive (SSD) that's faster than any hard drive currently available for PCs. Cerny demonstrated the speed of the new drive to *Wired* by comparing fast-travel times in Insomniac's Spider-Man. Warping Parker from one end of the open world to the other took 15 seconds on a PlayStation 4 Pro. The same maneuver took just 0.8 seconds on the new PlayStation. But obliterating load times is just one way the next PlayStation's ultra-fast drive could revolutionize gaming; limiting how fast you can move through open worlds, strategic motion blur, and the way developers are forced to design around data transfer limitations could all soon change.

Thankfully, Sony aims to keep some things the same next generation. *Wired* confirmed the new PlayStation still supports physical media, and is fully backward-compatible with PlayStation 4 games and PlayStation VR. Unsurprisingly, Sony isn't ready to put a price tag on the new system, but Cerny told *Wired* he believes the cost "will be appealing to gamers in light of its advanced feature set." Cerny also confirmed the system won't be coming out in 2019, but that some studios are already up and running on dev kits, and gamers can expect to see bridge titles that come out on both generations of hardware.

We obviously still have a lot to learn about the new PlayStation, and with Sony skipping E3 this year, we may have a while to wait. However, Sony's first round of information strikes a sharp contrast to the plans of its main competitor, which we're guessing is no coincidence. Sony's reveal dropped on the same day Microsoft finally confirmed its newest console is a digital-only version of the Xbox One S, a system in line with its vision of cloud-based gaming and subscription services. As other companies like Google forgo consoles completely in favor of game streaming – despite the technology's unsolved latency problems – Sony's decidedly old-school approach to next generation may be a welcome relief for many. ◆

Mark Cerny discussing the PlayStation 4 Pro at PlayStation Meeting 2016

A RENEWED HOPE

As Star Wars fandom teeters, Disney delivered a powerful message about the future of the franchise at this year's Celebration

by Andrew Reiner

all photos: Stone Chin

Heading into this year's Star Wars Celebration, uncertainty hung in the air over the future of Star Wars. Rian Johnson's *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* was a critical darling and ended up pulling in a hefty sum at the box office, but also received a surprising amount of backlash from fans, with some arguing that Johnson ruined Luke Skywalker's legacy. Disney's next entry, *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, was also generally liked by critics, but didn't pack theater seats, bringing in just $213 million in the domestic box office – a far cry from *The Last Jedi's* $620 million. It was the first Disney-run Star Wars film to not break $1 billion in the worldwide box office, pulling in just $392 million, which is a lot of money, but shockingly low for one of Disney's biggest draws. Star Wars Battlefront II also soured gamers on suiting up as their favorite characters, as an insidious microtransaction model bubbled to the surface more than the iconic action. The term "Star Wars fatigue" has become a talking point amongst fans.

Following the release of *Solo*, rumors swirled that alarms were sounding inside Disney's walls, and the company was taking a good, hard look at its roadmap for upcoming Star Wars films. Future anthology movies based on characters like Boba Fett were reportedly canceled or put on indefinite hold, with the focus shifting almost entirely to completing the Skywalker Saga.

Even this dedicated focus experienced a significant setback. Colin Trevorrow, who was brought in to write and direct *Episode IX*, was relinquished of these duties, echoing Phil Lord and Chris Miller's recent removal from *Solo*. All was clearly not well at Lucasfilm; something wasn't clicking between the creators and the iconic brand.

Episode IX didn't drift for long, and a new hope appeared through a familiar face. Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy convinced J.J. Abrams to return to Star Wars to finish out the trilogy he began. Although Abrams initially declined, he came around to the idea, enlisting the writing talents of Chris Terrio (*Argo*) to help him reach the finish line. George Lucas was also consulted, as Abrams felt they weren't just penning the end of a trilogy but the final chapter to nine movies. This story needed to speak to 40 years of history.

Although hopes of Boba Fett getting his own film appear to be in a trash compactor, Lucasfilm surprised everyone last year with the announcement of *The Mandalorian*, the first ever live-action Star Wars series for its forthcoming Disney+ streaming service. The news came on the heels of other good news: *The Clone Wars* animated series is coming back for a new season, and gamers would soon get their hands on Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order, a game that follows a Padawan's life after the horrific events of Order 66 in *Episode III*.

Once *Episode IX* releases on December 20, Disney's president Bob Iger said Star Wars would go on hiatus from theaters for an undisclosed amount of time, but would return in a big way with two new trilogies. The first is helmed by Rian Johnson, and another by *Game of Thrones* showrunners David Benioff and Dan Weiss. More live-action television programs are also on the way, one centering on *Rogue One*'s Cassian Andor and K-2SO.

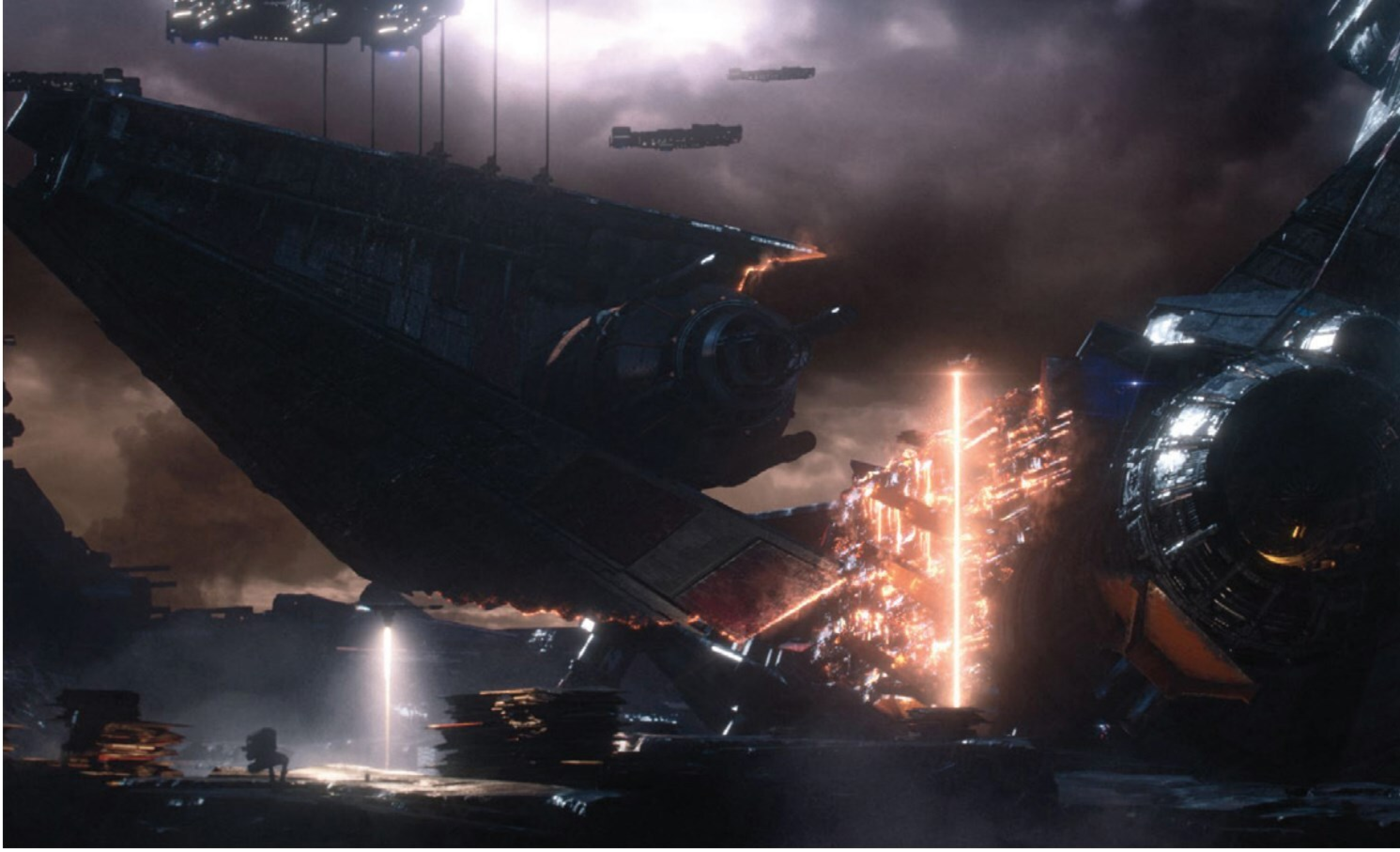
A glut of Star Wars stuff is coming – including the Galaxy's Edge theme park – and a lot of it debuted at this year's Star Wars Celebration, held this April for five days in Chicago's massive McCormick Center convention hall. The show floor was a sprawling mess of merchants, autograph sessions, and photo opportunities being navigated by a slow-shuffling sea of people decked out in Star Wars shirts or elaborate cosplays. The big reveals were conducted across the street in the Wintrust Arena, which was filled each day with fans waving lightsabers when the aduitorium dimmed. When they weren't entranced by visions of what comes next to a galaxy far, far away, fans stood in line for hours to secure exclusive merchandise sold only at Celebration. Hasbro's new Black Series Darth Maul and Obi-Wan action figures, which sold for $28 each at the show, now collectively fetch more than $250 online.

Many of the fans I talked to voiced enthusiasm for both Star Wars' past and present, some outright saying that it's their lifeblood – the source that led to a family being born or lifelong friendships developing. I also talked to a number of individuals who were down on Star Wars, feeling snake-bit by Disney's handling of the property. One person who despised *The Last Jedi* walked the show floor with a renewed hope for the franchise after seeing the first teasers for *The Mandalorian* and *Episode IX* (which was revealed to be called *The Rise of Skywalker*).

Disney used this large gathering of fans to deliver a clear message about the future of Star Wars. That message wasn't said outright, but rather conveyed in each panel: "for the fans, and by the fans." Enlisting huge Star Wars enthusiasts like J.J. Abrams, Dave Filoni, and Jon Favreau to shepherd in the future went over incredibly well. They said all of the right things, and collectively helped remove the storm cloud hanging over the franchise. The concern of fatigue that seeped into conversations on Celebration's first day was nowhere to be found on day five.

Lessons were clearly learned from *Solo*, and Disney appears to have its Star Wars business in order again. Yes, the slate of upcoming content is still bloated, but I like what I've seen of these projects and trust the creators behind them. Whenever John Williams' theme song kicked in, I couldn't help but walk the show floor with bounce in my step, knowing exciting things are on the way.

Over the next four pages, I break down each of the big new beats that will be heading our way in the year ahead.



Respawn Entertainment's entrance into the Star Wars universe was revealed at last year's EA Play press conference, teasing a single-player, story-driven experience set shortly after the events of *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*. At this year's Celebration, we finally got our first look at Jedi: Fallen Order. The game follows a Padawan learner named Cal Kestis, a 20-something male human forced into hiding by the Empire, which has labeled all Jedi as wanted criminals and is in the process of hunting them down.

This era, known as the Dark Times, shows the Empire establishing a firm grip over the galaxy, and the Emperor coming into his own as the master of Darth Vader. The game begins with Cal in the throes of a new life as a scrapper on the planet Bracca, a location created by Respawn and Lucasfilm's story group. Although we've seen the Empire often abandon older vessels, such as the star destroyer on Jakku, many are brought to Bracca to be broken down for parts. Massive machines use lasers to slice apart the ships with the swiftness and precision of a surgeon with a blade cutting into flesh. Beneath the vessels rest giant, toothy beasts that feed on the metals falling from the ships. They serve the role of efficient garbage disposals for the planet.

Cal has been accepted as just another worker doing this grueling work, until he accidentally uses his force powers. We don't know exactly why he taps into the Force, but a moment in the teaser trailer shows a worker accidentally falling into one of the beasts' mouths and Cal reaching out, almost like he's going to use the Force to pull his buddy.

Cal didn't finish his Jedi training prior to Order 66's execution, and we don't know his level of Force proficiency at the beginning of the game. He does eventually befriend another Jedi in hiding named Cere, an older human woman who serves as his mentor, potentially helping him reach Jedi Knighthood.

When the Empire learns of Cal's location, they dispatch an Inquisitor named the Second Sister. Along with Vader, Inquisitors are Force-sensitive Jedi slayers who uphold the Emperor's vow of extinguishing the Jedi Order. Prior to the Second Sister arriving, a group of stormtroopers called the Purge Troopers are brought in to soften up the Jedi, making for an easier kill. These troopers wear black armor and have glowing red visors. Their designs were teased in Marvel's most recent Darth Vader comic-book series, but you see them in action for the first time in Jedi: Fallen Order.

Cal is brought to life by actor Cameron Monaghan, who made a name for himself as Ian Gallagher on *Shameless* and Jerome Valeska on *Gotham*. Jedi: Fallen Order director Stig Asmussen thinks Monaghan understands Cal better than anyone. "He can challenge people on the writing team because he's living the role," he says. "He's been on a pretty rigorous shooting schedule recently. This is when he's living and breathing it."

The concept art for Jedi: Fallen Order shows Cal and his trusty droid BD-1 alone in various ruins and wilderness settings. Star Wars is often about ensembles overcoming odds, but the imagery here delivers the feeling of

Jedi: Fallen Order tells the story of a Padawan on the run

isolation and being alone. “We decided to make a story that's more ‘man versus wild,’” Asmussen says. “That allowed us the range to go to different places. It's not just Cal versus the environment, but also Cal versus the elements. To a certain extent, the Empire versus the elements as well.”

Respawn focused solely on the story setup for Celebration’s reveal, but says the game is played from the third-person perspective and the action focuses heavily on lightsaber techniques that are easy to pick up but have depth that players can master. Cal’s lightsaber is not one he built himself and is in rough shape, looking like it was originally a double-sided blade cut in two. Asmussen says as Cal grows with the Force, so too will the saber. He can apparently upgrade it as the story unfolds.

The trailer hints at some of the action players can expect, such as being able to run along walls, a mechanic Respawn knocked out of the park in the Titanfall series. We also see Cal use the Force to stop a spinning fan, implying he can move things using his mind.

All of the footage shown was built in-engine and looked beautiful, delivering the level of detail you want to see from both a triple-A project and one set in the Star Wars universe. While many expected Respawn to use the Source Engine, which it used for Titanfall and Apex Legends, or Frostbite, which most internal EA teams use now, Jedi: Fallen Order is instead built with Unreal.

The game’s reveal ended with a November 15 release date, which is just three days after *The Mandalorian* debuts on Disney+, and a month before *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* arrives in theaters. Jedi: Fallen Order will launch simultaneously on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC.

VADER IMMORTAL

The name Vader Immortal makes it sounds like you play as Darth Vader, but you are actually a guest being held against your will in his fortress on the lava planet Mustafar. In this VR experience designed exclusively for Oculus headsets, you play as an unnamed smuggler who just happens to be operating near the wrong planet in a ship called the *Windfall*. This smuggler doesn't have a voice, gender, or age, as developer ILMxLAB wants you to embody that role. However, your droid co-pilot ZOE3 has plenty to say, and is voiced by Maya Rudolph. ZOE3 is said to have plenty of spunk.

Vader Immortal is a three-part episodic series with significant star power behind its development. The script is penned by David S. Goyer, a writer of movies like *The Dark Knight* trilogy and games like Call of Duty: Black Ops. The Smuggler’s descent to the dark side is brought to life by director Ben Snow, who worked in film visual FX for 30 years on such titles as *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* and *Iron Man*. The narrative’s flow is overseen by Mohen Leo, who recently received Academy Award and BAFTA nominations as visual effects supervisor for *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*.

Vader Immortal was playable at this year's Star Wars Celebration on an Oculus Quest. The demo is short, but effective, providing story sequences and an intense lightsaber training battle. The demo delivers a satisfying look into what this VR experience will offer, and even brings you face-to-face with Darth Vader, or should I say face-to-chest, given his enormous and intimidating size.

Rather than force-choking you to death or harming you in any way, Vader instead hands you a Jedi Holocron. You need to reach out and grab it, and then use your other hand to interact with it. The gold-adorned cube comes to life with blue energy surging within it. This pleases Vader. You apparently have Force powers and he probably wants to turn you. When he leaves the room, the demo moves from your *lovely* interrogation room, complete with a chair with shackles, to an expansive training room with large bay windows giving you a scenic view of rolling rivers of lava. In front of you is a pedestal holding a lightsaber.

Nothing happens until you reach out and grab it. Then the room comes to life with metal cylinders rising from the ground, each containing a droid with a lightsaber or a Marksman-H combat remote, the floating ball Luke Skywalker trained with on the *Millennium Falcon* in *A New Hope*. With a press of a button, your saber comes to life, surprisingly with a blue blade – you'd think Vader would only keep red ones around. I ask Goyer why the saber isn't appropriately evil toned. “There are narrative reasons for it, but I better not go into it now or I could get in some trouble,” he says. “Some answers to questions like this will be answered in the first episode, others will be doled out later on in the experience.”

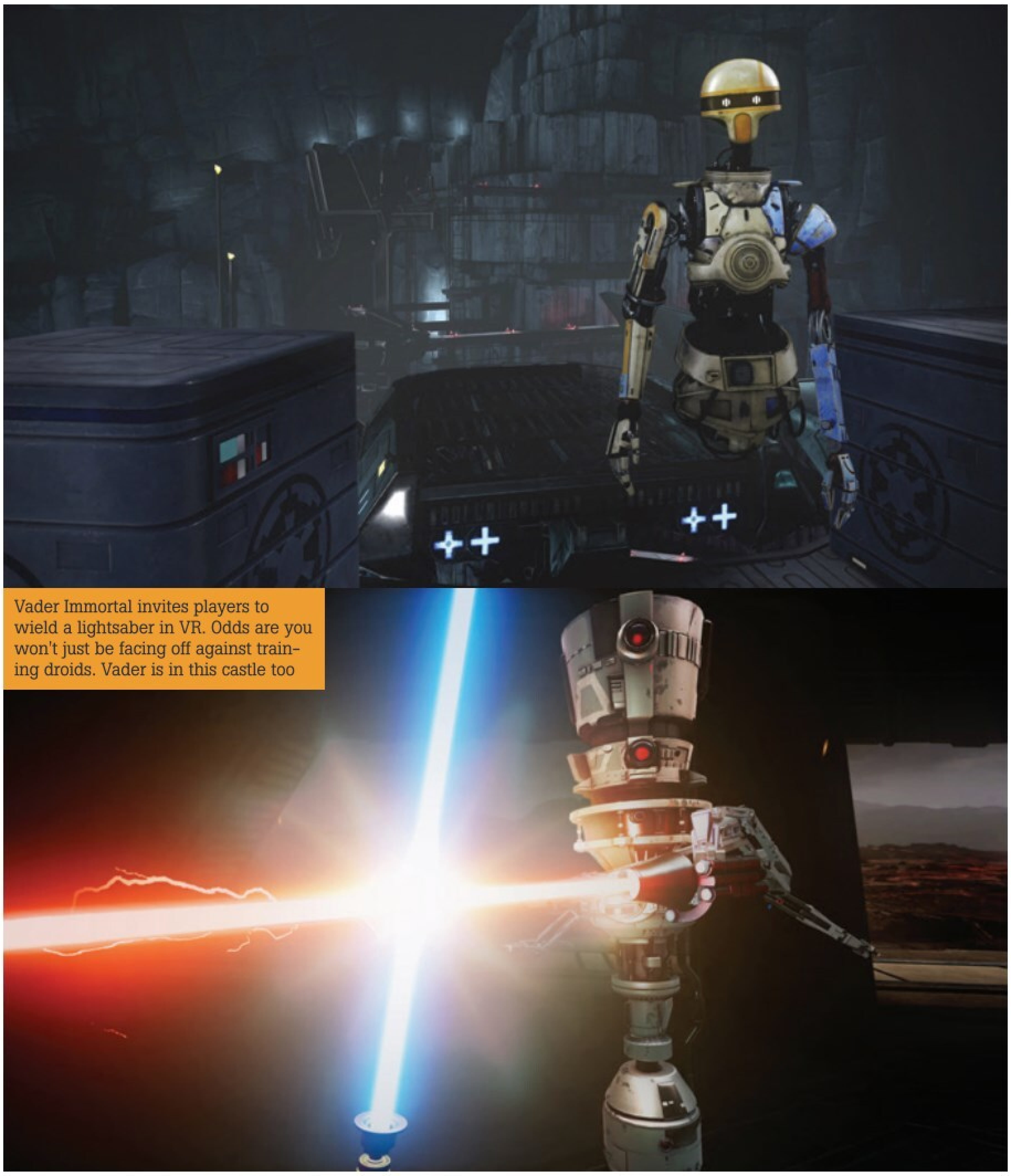
Sound design in this training area is key, as you must listen for the Marksman-H to know when it's going to fire lasers at you. If you time your lightsaber swings correctly, you can knock the lasers back into the droid, removing it from the fray. The other droids approach you quickly, and you are tasked with blocking their saber attacks to open up a window where you can hack away at their metal bodies. This section of the demo delivered three waves of combat.

That’s all ILMxLAB really needed to show to sell the concept of this Star Wars experience. “We found people liked the lightsaber experience so much that there's an extended mode where you can train as much as you want,” Leo says. “In that area you'll earn different colors of lightsabers.”

The entire first episode is contained on Mustafar, mostly in Vader's monolith. You get to explore a good chunk of it, more than you've seen before, including some of his personal spaces. “This story will go into why Vader may have built his castle here,” Goyer adds. "You get to explore a little more of a what is going on inside of his head, and you definitely get to learn more about Mustafar and what is going on on that planet – why it's been special for the last thousand years."

While the demo warped me between two rooms where I was tethered to a small circle, in the final game you can move around freely using the analog sticks or teleporting. You also can interact with various objects you find in the environment – probably of the Sith variety.

“I was super excited to be involved with a project with Vader,” Goyer says. "VR is really good about giving you a sense of presence, and taking you to another place and making you feel like you are really there. The possibility of doing that in the Star Wars universe, and to do it with Vader sort of as your guide and to add to his lore, that was too good to pass up.” The first episode of Vader Immortal is set to release this spring for Oculus Quest and Rift.



Vader Immortal invites players to wield a lightsaber in VR. Odds are you won't just be facing off against training droids. Vader is in this castle too

THE RISE OF SKYWALKER

The biggest reveal at Star Wars Celebration was *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, the final installment in George Lucas’ ambitious nine-chapter story. The hour-long panel was hosted by Stephen Colbert, who welcomed J.J. Abrams, Kathleen Kennedy, and most of the actors from the film to the stage, including Billy Dee Williams, who reprises his role as Lando Calrissian. Colbert asked Williams if it was easy to find Lando again, and Williams said “he never left me.” The packed house in the auditorium roared in approval. The film also welcomes a new face in Naomi Ackie, who plays a character named Jannah.

The panel concluded with *The Rise of Skywalker*’s teaser trailer, which delivered an action-packed jolt that this franchise needed. We saw Rey flip over a TIE Fighter roaring across a desert, and Finn, Poe, and C-3PO in a *Mad Max*-like chase sequence. Then the unexpected happened. At the end of the trailer, we hear Luke say, “We’ll always be with you. No one’s ever really gone.” This line was followed by a black screen, silence, and then the familiar cackle of Emperor Palpatine.

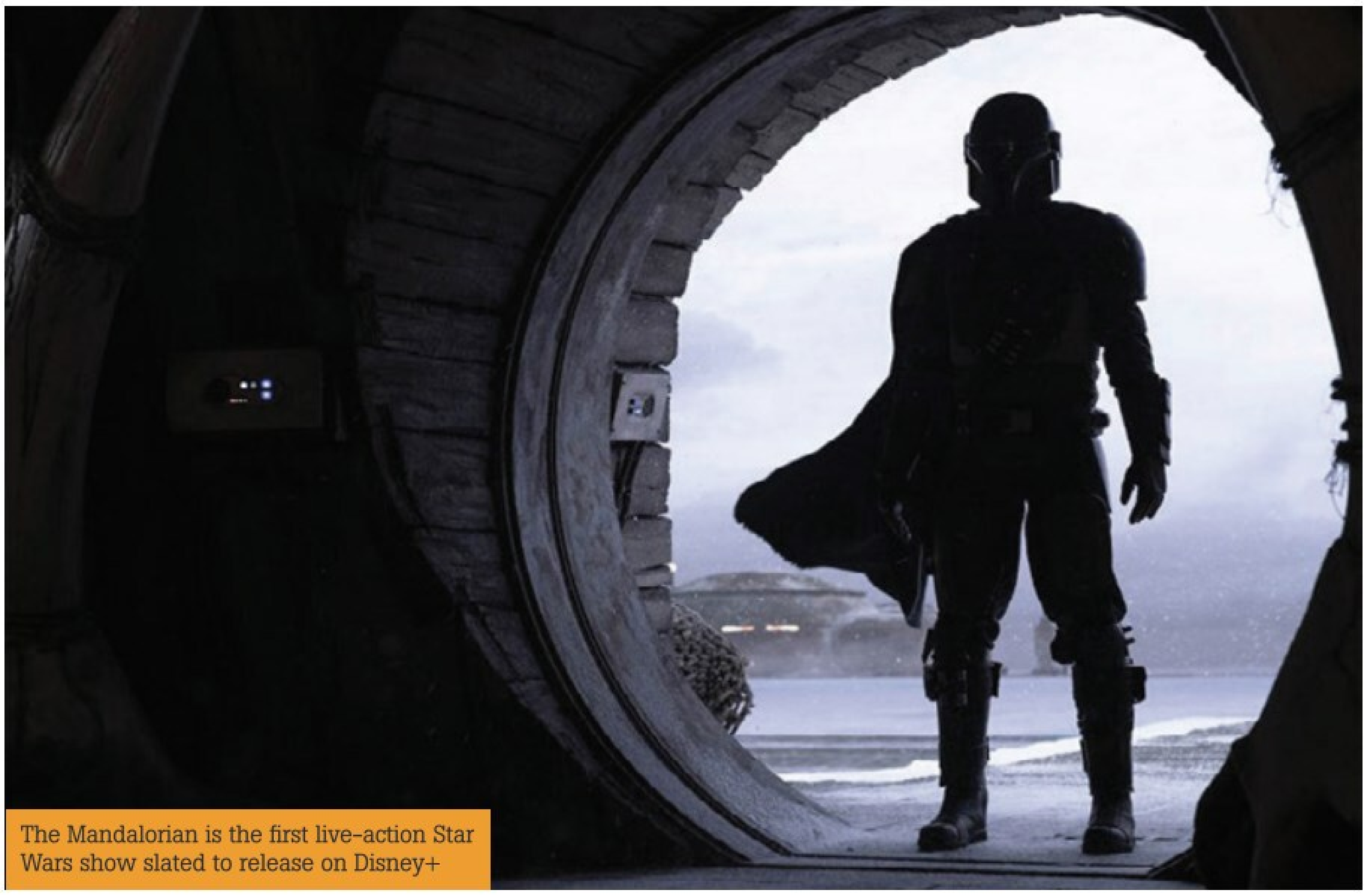
Lucasfilm wasted no time confirming this mysterious laughter. Ian McDiarmid, the actor behind the Emperor, took the stage, smiled, and in that familiar evil voice said “Roll it again.” The trailer then played for a second time, and fans again lost their minds during it, struggling to come to terms with the Emperor returning.

A few days later, McDiarmid turned up again at the panel for the 20th anniversary of *The Phantom Menace*. “Friday, I just happened to be in the area, so I thought I should just drop in for a laugh,” he said. Host Warwick Davis, who has played several Star Wars characters including Wicket the Ewok, asked McDiarmid if he ever thought he would reprise this role,

referencing the development of *The Phantom Menace*. “No, as you know, Darth Vader chucked me down that tunnel,” McDiarmid said. “I thought, ‘That’s the end.’ I did say to George [Lucas], when I did come up for air, ‘Is he…’ and before I could finish the sentence, he went ‘…dead. Yes.’ ‘Couldn’t he perhaps?’ ‘No, he’s dead.’”

How is this evil figure back? “I made the assumption that we’d never see him again. So I guess that’s how it will remain,” McDiarmid said with a smile.

The name of the film also implies that a Skywalker could return. Many people speculate it could be Luke as a ghost or even in the flesh, and Abrams knows it’s provocative. “The title feels like it’s the right title for this movie,” he said to *Entertainment Tonight*. “The idea of having to incorporate the stories that have come before strangely is the story of the movie. It’s the characters in the film inheriting everything that’s come before in previous generations, whether it’s the sins of the father or the wisdom they’ve acquired, and the question is, ‘[Is] this new generation up to the task, can they stand up to what they have to?’ So in a way, I feel like, we came to this movie having inherited a lot, and the question is ‘Can we do it?’ We ask ourselves that every day.”



The Mandalorian is the first live-action Star Wars show slated to release on Disney+

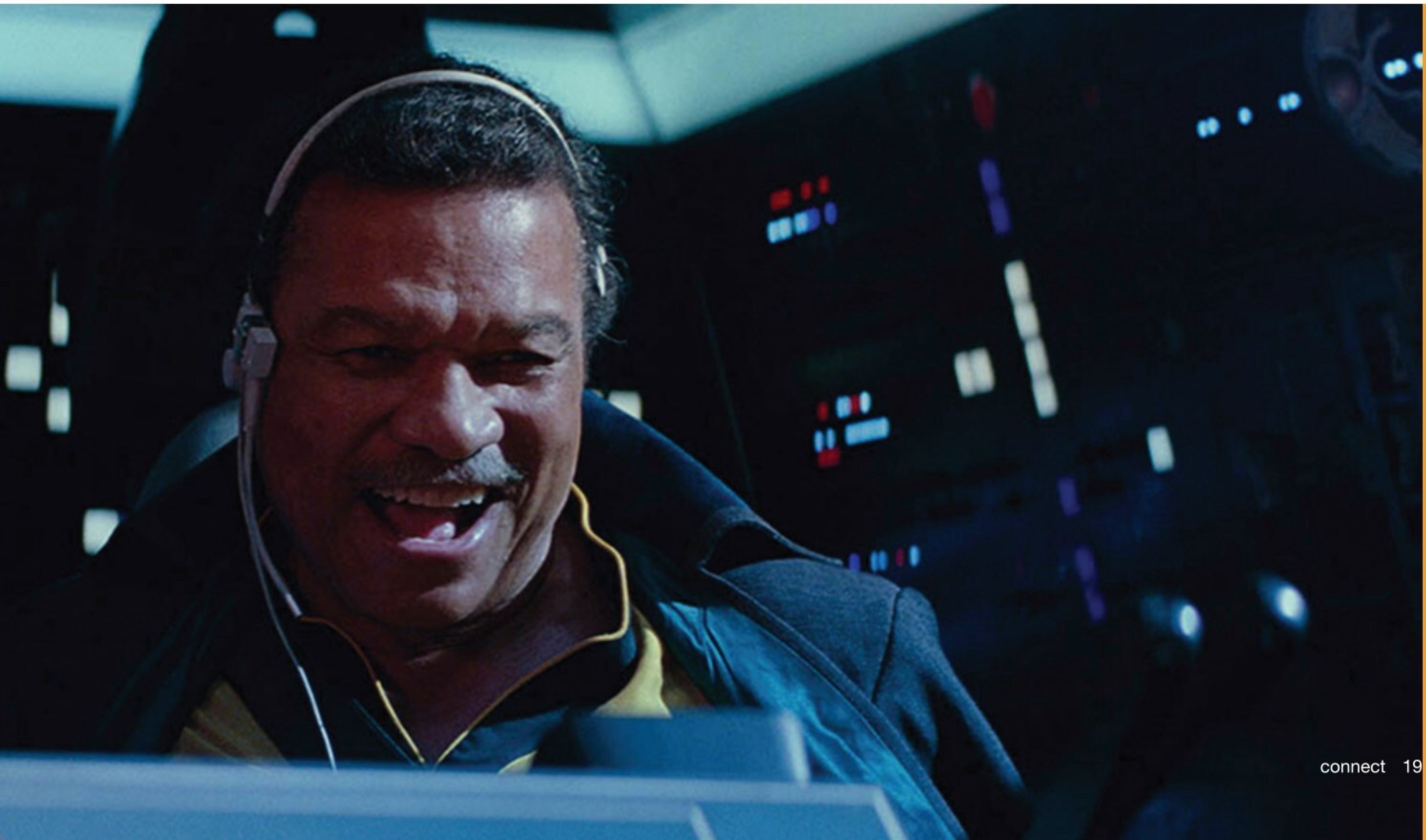
THE MANDALORIAN

Star Wars has long had a popular presence on the smaller screen, but only in an animated capacity. That will change on November 12 when *The Mandalorian* debuts on Disney+, the company’s new streaming service. Series creators Jon Favreau (*Iron Man*) and Dave Filoni (*The Clone Wars*) briefly detailed what we can expect from this ambitious project.

The show is set after the events of *Return of the Jedi* in a time of chaos in the galaxy. The Empire is in shambles, and the Rebellion and other factions are on the rise. This instability is witnessed through the eyes of The Mandalorian, a gun for hire played by actor Pedro Pascal (*Game of Thrones*, *Narcos*). Pedro calls the role “fantasy fulfillment.” The Mandalorian-style armor is one of the most iconic in Star Wars, worn by Boba and Jango Fett. As menacing as their presences are, we barely got to know either of them. That won’t be the case with The Mandarian. Pascal says he turned to spaghetti westerns for inspiration on the role, specifically calling out the work of Clint Eastwood.

Other actors on the project include Gina Carano (*Deadpool*) as an ex-rebel shock trooper named Kara Dune, Carl Weathers (*Rocky*) as a shady dealer, and Werner Herzog, Emily Swallow, and Nick Nolte in unknown roles.

Favreau and Filoni sadly didn’t conclude their panel with a trailer, but did show behind-the-scenes footage and a lengthy clip, which leans heavily on practical effects, even for The Mandalorian’s ship, *The Razorcrest*. The footage held qualities that looked like it was filmed 40 years ago, when Lucas was first putting together *A New Hope*. Whether that’s from Favreau and company paying homage to Lucas’ work, or having to make due with a lower budget is unknown, but it looked like it fit right in with what fans expect from Star Wars.



by Kimberley Wallace

Bringing Pixar Worlds To Kingdom Hearts III

Square Enix transports these properties into the battle between light and darkness

As an associate creative director at Pixar Animation Studios, Tasha Sounart works on the theme park team to ensure Pixar's characters and properties are represented in the most ideal and authentic way in animation direction, marketing, and merchandise. Her job got a little extra quirk with Pixar's foray into Kingdom Hearts III. As a Kingdom Hearts fan, Sounart became the liaison between Square Enix and Pixar in bringing Pixar's works to the series for the first time ever, something high on fans' wish lists. The result was two of the more unique storylines for the Disney worlds in the game via *Monsters Inc.* and *Toy Story.* Instead of merely rehashing what happened in the movies, both worlds included brand-new events, fun easter eggs, and were part of each franchise's larger lore. We chatted with Sounart about the decisions that went into making this possible, and how she helped convince Pixar to become a part of Kingdom Hearts.

Can you explain more about what your role entails and how you helped with Kingdom Hearts III?

I work on anything involving our characters in any of the Disney parks. I've also been involved on video games that [use] our characters. It's almost like the role of a game publisher, where we are overseeing the development of the game, but we're not actually developing the game ourselves. We work with the game developers in order to portray the characters the right way, or the way that represents them best to tell the best story. For Kingdom Hearts, I was involved all the way since [Square Enix] even pitched the first concept to us through the story development, the layout, animations, and character and keyblade designs.

You were a fan of Kingdom Hearts before working on this, correct?

I just really like RPGs, especially Japanese RPGs. It's probably my favorite genre of games. I played the two main games in the Kingdom Hearts series and then I also played a couple of the handhelds. I haven't played every Kingdom Hearts game, but I've played several of them and I really like the series. As a fan, I always really wanted to see Pixar represented in the games and I was like, "Why aren't they using any Pixar stuff?" [laughs] But, honestly, I think one of the problems is that Pixar didn't have anyone to be a champion for it until I came on. There wasn't someone familiar with the series who could basically promote it at the studio as something that we should be doing.

When I came back to Pixar after working at Double Fine, the head of Disney Interactive, Rob Rowe, came up to my desk one day and he said, "There's this project that Square Enix is proposing to us and they want us to be involved in it. It's called Kingdom Hearts." I was like, "What?! Yes! Yes! We should do it." He said, "Some of the people here aren't sure if we should do it." I said, "Who do I have to talk to to make this happen?" I was involved in the early meetings where we were trying to make sure everyone knew what Kingdom Hearts was and was okay with Pixar being represented in it. I guess there's just some fear of what you don't know. Some of the leadership at Pixar wasn't as familiar with games, so a lot of it was just reassuring them that [Square Enix] is very talented and to look at all this other stuff that they've done. They have this amazing attention to detail, which is very similar to Pixar.

What didn't you realize as a fan that went into creating a Kingdom Hearts game?

Having worked in the game industry [during my time at Double Fine], I actually did know a lot of what went into making the games, but I hadn't actually worked as close with a Japanese team before. I didn't know some of the process of how the game got localized. They did all the animation to the Japanese dialogue first and then the English dialogue was added later. They went through an extra step, which a lot of games don't do, of reanimating a lot of the lip sync. That wasn't something I was expecting them to do, and I feel a lot of games don't put as much effort into the localization. Also, their attention to detail. They really wanted to get everything right and as close to the films as possible. They would scour the backgrounds of our films for the detail in the set dressing and get that into the environments. That was pleasantly surprising how much research they did. When we saw Andy's room for the first time we were like, 'Oh my gosh! It's, like amazing.' It was beyond any other game graphics that we had seen there before. The Woody and Buzz models that they did – those were the first ones that they showed us, and everyone was just blown away by the quality of it.

Did you have to explain the lore and essence of Kingdom Hearts to Pixar? How did that go?

Yes. Some of the art directors, they don't play as many games as I do or even know specific games. At the same time, the Kingdom Hearts story is even too confusing for me. [laughs] I don't even know if I know the lore that well, but I can explain it well enough so that I can explain the main concepts like Sora, Donald, and Goofy are in the games and the worlds are divided up into these planets. I tell a simplified version, just what they need to know for the sequence. Some of the stuff is them asking, "What are these things?" and I'm like, "Oh, that's the Heartless. They're like this dark force that Sora needs to fight and they're in all the levels." If I can explain it in the context of the game and tell them that's normal for the game, they might be more forgiving of something that can seem weird at first.

How much say does Pixar ultimately have when it lends the characters to Square Enix?
I try to never say a direct no to something. I always try to come up with some sort of solution that will work for everyone. One of the biggest challenges we had on this project was the design for monster Sora. It just took us a long time to figure out something that felt like Sora but still felt like it would fit in the Monsters Inc. world and was something everyone liked and felt monster-y and appealing enough. One thing that changed was the color. At first, he was an orange color but when we saw it in the game we felt like it wasn't quite working. Sora kind of just looked like a tiger, so we did a few different color studies on him. We ended up going with gray because it matches the gray, black, and red color scheme of his clothes. That turned out to be the right choice for Sora, but it's difficult sometimes in how we get to that spot.

We do have a lot of say in how our characters are used, and I think that we should. That's part of how we protect our brand. We pay a lot of attention to how our characters are used and how they're portrayed. Sometimes we're probably like a thorn in the side of the developers, but for us, it's very important. But we also do try to keep the developers' wishes. That's why I ask them why they made decisions and try to figure out if there's a gameplay reason to see if we can do something that achieves the same purpose and makes sense for that character.

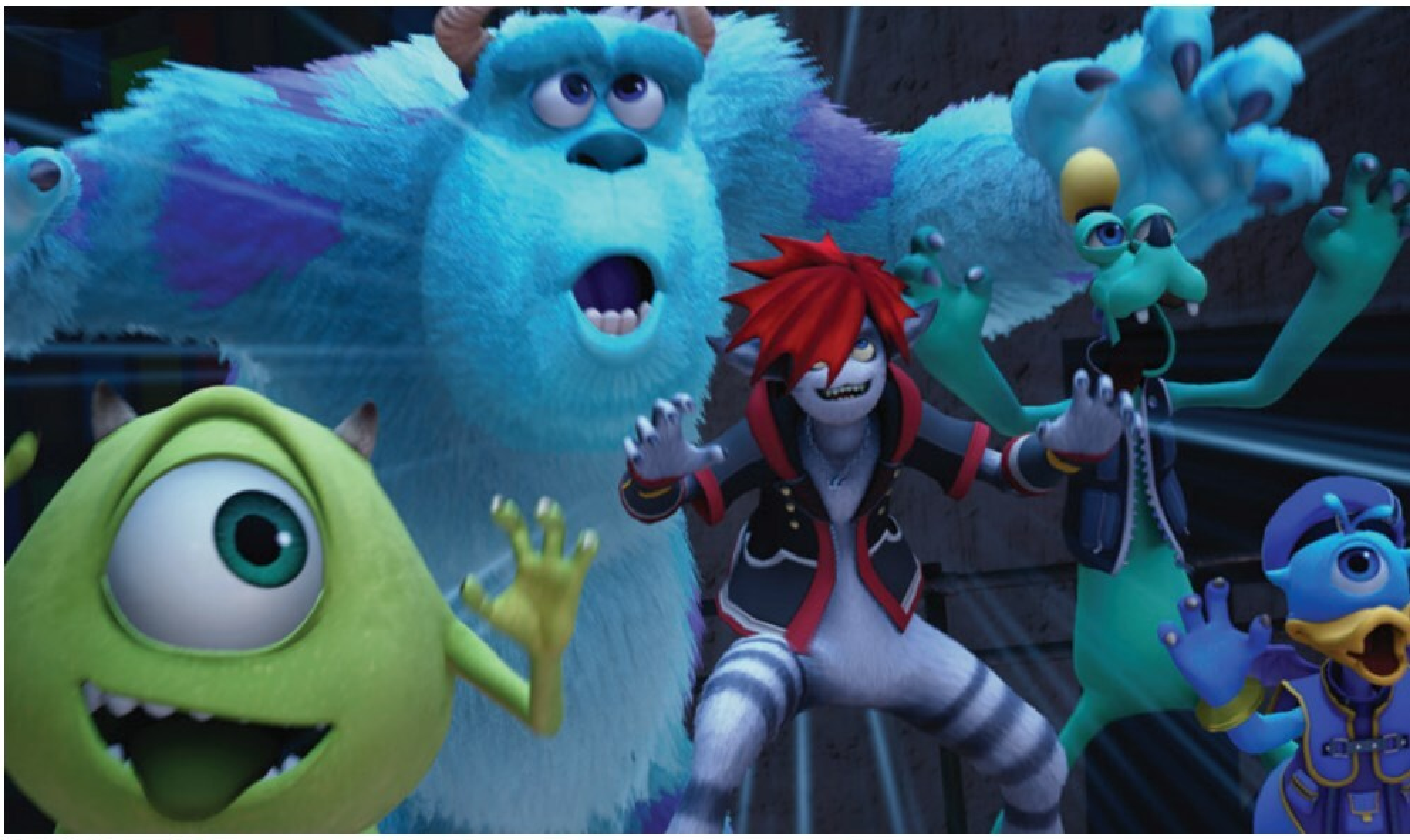
What are some Pixar lore rules for specific worlds that we wouldn't expect?
For Toy Story, [the toys] can't interact with humans. We usually like to keep things at a toy scale, which is why Sora, Donald, and Goofy all change into toys when they go into the Toy Story world. For the perspective, the camera is really low down and you're looking up and everything else seems really big. The Toy Story world was a little trickier because we knew we were making *Toy Story 4*. We had to explain the storyline in a way that people wouldn't expect Buzz and Woody to mention seeing Sora when they go see *Toy Story 4*. That's why we created the storyline of [being in] this alternate dimension where Woody and Buzz have been separated from Andy, so then when they go back to their regular dimension, they wouldn't necessarily remember Kingdom Hearts III.

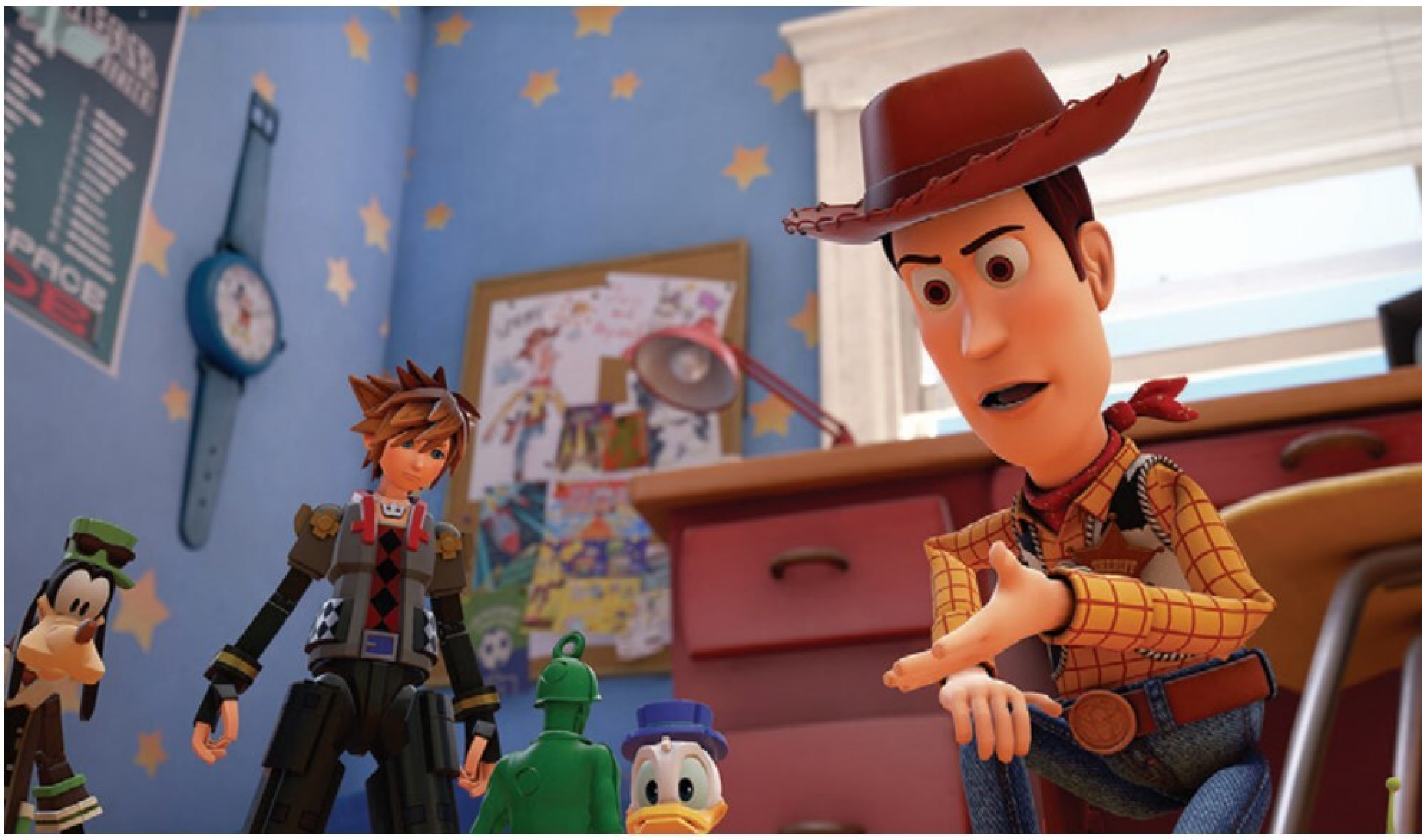
I feel like we had a little more freedom with *Monsters Inc.*, but who knows? If we do make a Monsters sequel at some point, we'll have to figure it out – if Mike and Sully remember Sora or not. The Monsters world was supposed to take place after *Monsters Inc.*'s storyline, so they're no longer relying on scream power and now they're relying on laughter for their energy. That's why Mike and Sully needed to make Boo laugh and that's part of the levels.

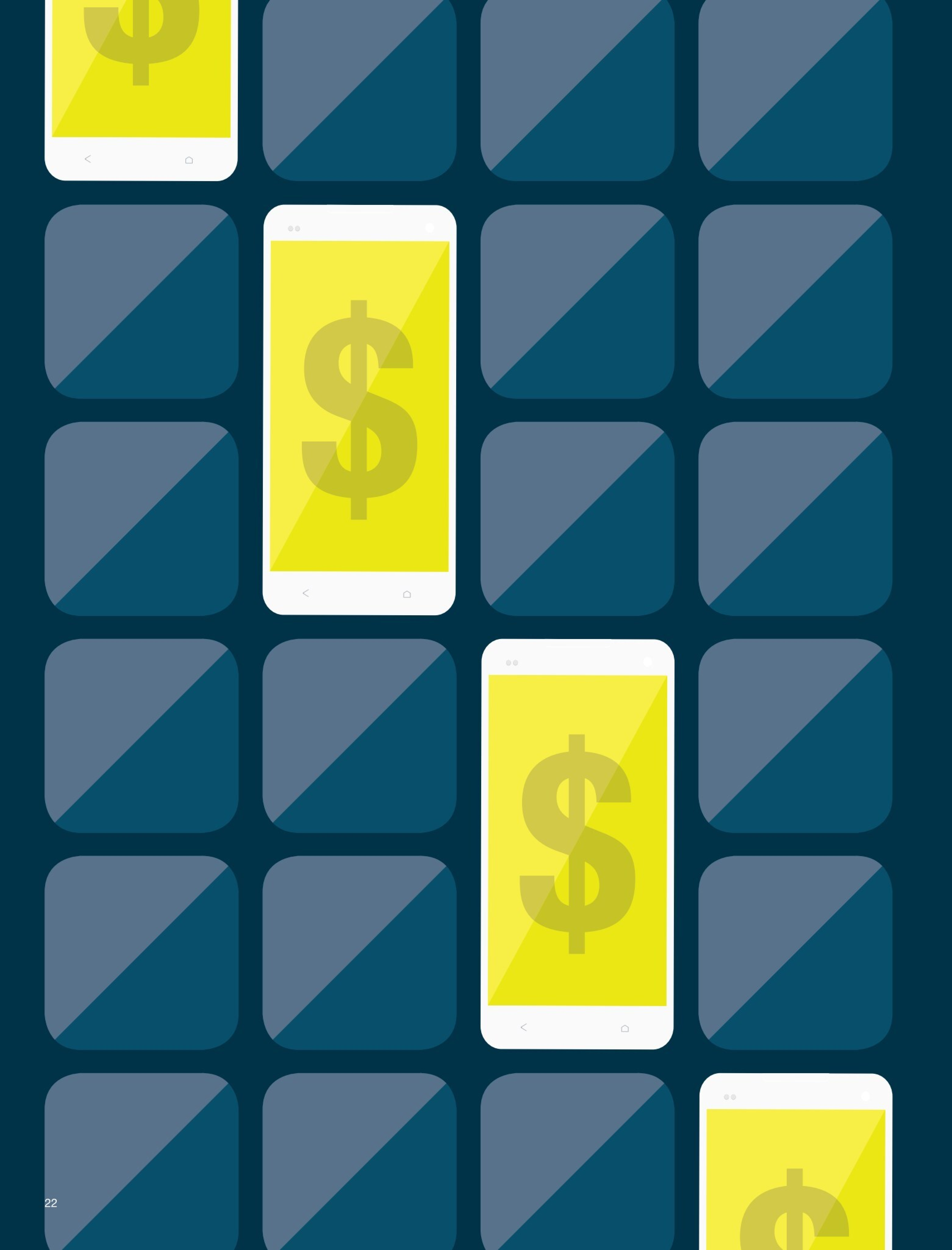
I love when the group does the bowling attack in the Monsters Inc. world. Who came up with that?
All the special attacks we reviewed. That was one that Square Enix pitched to us and I just thought it was hilarious. I didn't really change it that much – it was more tweaking the animation. A lot of their ideas were really fun, funny, and in character. We really didn't have to change that many. I think there was a Sully attack where he did a belly flop or something and I felt that was a little too funny for Sully. Mike would be the funny character and Sully would be more of the tough character. It's just making sure everything feels right for the character.

What are some of your favorite moments from the Pixar worlds?
For the Toy Story world, I really love those musical frogs that play instruments. As soon as I saw those guys, I was like, "I want to collect those!" They should make those in real life. There's a cutscene where one of the army men is stuck in one of the instruments, then when he gets out his army man partner has to drag him away. It's like a satire of a war movie, where a solider gets injured, and it just makes me laugh every time. In the Monsters world, they're trying to make Boo laugh. Mike is doing different things and she's not reacting. He tells a joke where he says, "I lost my contact!" Then he's looking around on the floor for his contact and I don't know why that joke just makes me laugh every time. It's so stupid, but funny.

What other Pixar worlds would you like to see come to Kingdom Hearts in the future?
I hope that we can keep working on more Kingdom Hearts games. Personally, I loved working on this, so I'd love to do more stuff. My personal favorite Pixar film is *Inside Out*. Anything we do in the parks or for merchandise for *Inside Out*, I love it, so I'd love to see that. *Coco* is probably my second favorite Pixar film. I just think the world of the Land of the Dead is so colorful and fun, and the music is so good. I'd love to see something with *Coco*. Those are my favorite, but I'd be happy with any other Pixar film.







A Flood In The Market

How two developers thumbed their noses at the industry that crushed their dreams – and made money in the process

by Ben Reeves

Mobile games were supposed to be an indie developer nirvana. When the iPhone debuted in 2007, Apple pitched consumers on the promise of an endless stream of tiny creative games and other productivity applications. Indie developers immediately recognized the market's potential: A small team of developers could release their experimental projects to millions of users at a low price and reap large rewards. Early mobile hits like Words with Friends, Fruit Ninja, and Temple Run seemed to confirm this notion, and those titles helped their developers amass significant nest eggs.

Then the gold rush happened, and the mobile market metastasized into something ugly. App stores overflowed with ad-driven, free-to-play games that catered to the lowest common denominator. Mobile game development became financially unsustainable for many. In the midst of this mobile "indiepocalypse," two friends found success in an unlikely place. Their secret: Make a thousand bad games.

Ziba Scott and Alex Schwartz at a party during GDC 2013, around the time they came up with their idea for Slots

THE BROKEN DREAMS OF GAME DEVELOPERS

In 2013, Alex Schwartz and Ziba Scott joined a shared workspace co-op in Boston while independently pursuing careers in game development. Both designers had shifted to the mobile space with the dream of making their big break in the industry. After their first meeting, they quickly bonded over the struggle to realize that dream.

Schwartz had attended college for game design before landing a job at Seven45 Studios working on a failed Rock Band clone called Power Gig: Rise of the SixString. After its release, Schwartz set off on his own and formed Owlchemy Labs, the indie studio that released the racing smuggler game Snuggle Truck as well as the early VR standout Job Simulator.

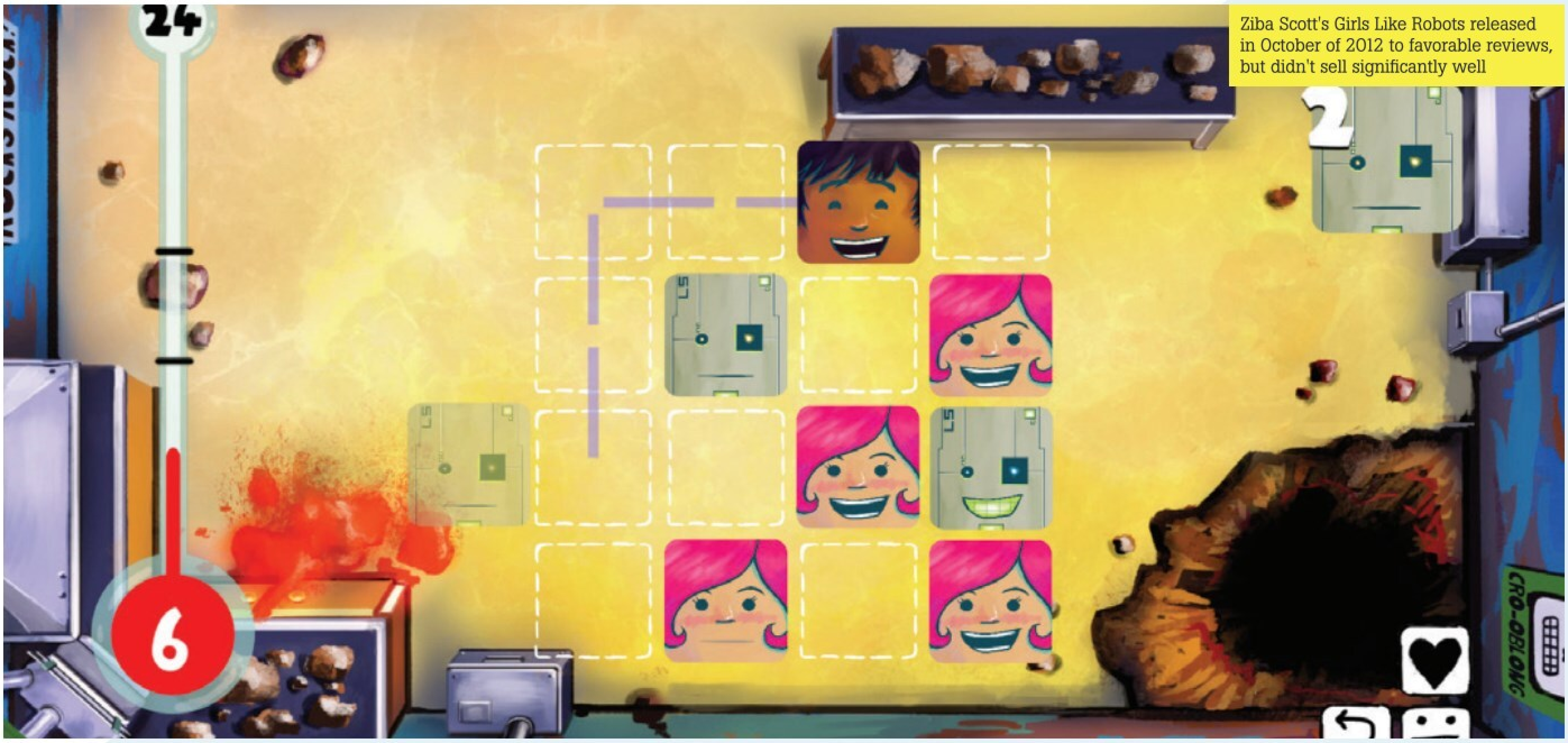
Scott, on the other hand, worked for seven years as a Linux consultant and web developer when he decided that making games was more fulfilling. After earning a master's degree in serious game design from Michigan State University, Scott secured a publishing deal with Adult Swim Games for his puzzle game Girls like Robots. By the time Schwartz and Scott met, they had both signed contracts with big publishers and released creative indie titles to favorable reviews. And yet, both designers still struggled to make ends meet.

"We always felt like if we could do something that was creatively fulfilling, and we made enough money on game number one to fund game number two, then that was top-tier success," Schwartz says. "We played the multiplatform hustle, where if you make something in Unity you can put it anywhere, and it wasn't working. The dream wasn't 'Oh man, I hope we can be kings of mobile.' We were just chasing platforms, and we were watching the concept that people would spend three dollars on a premium mobile game nosedive super hard."

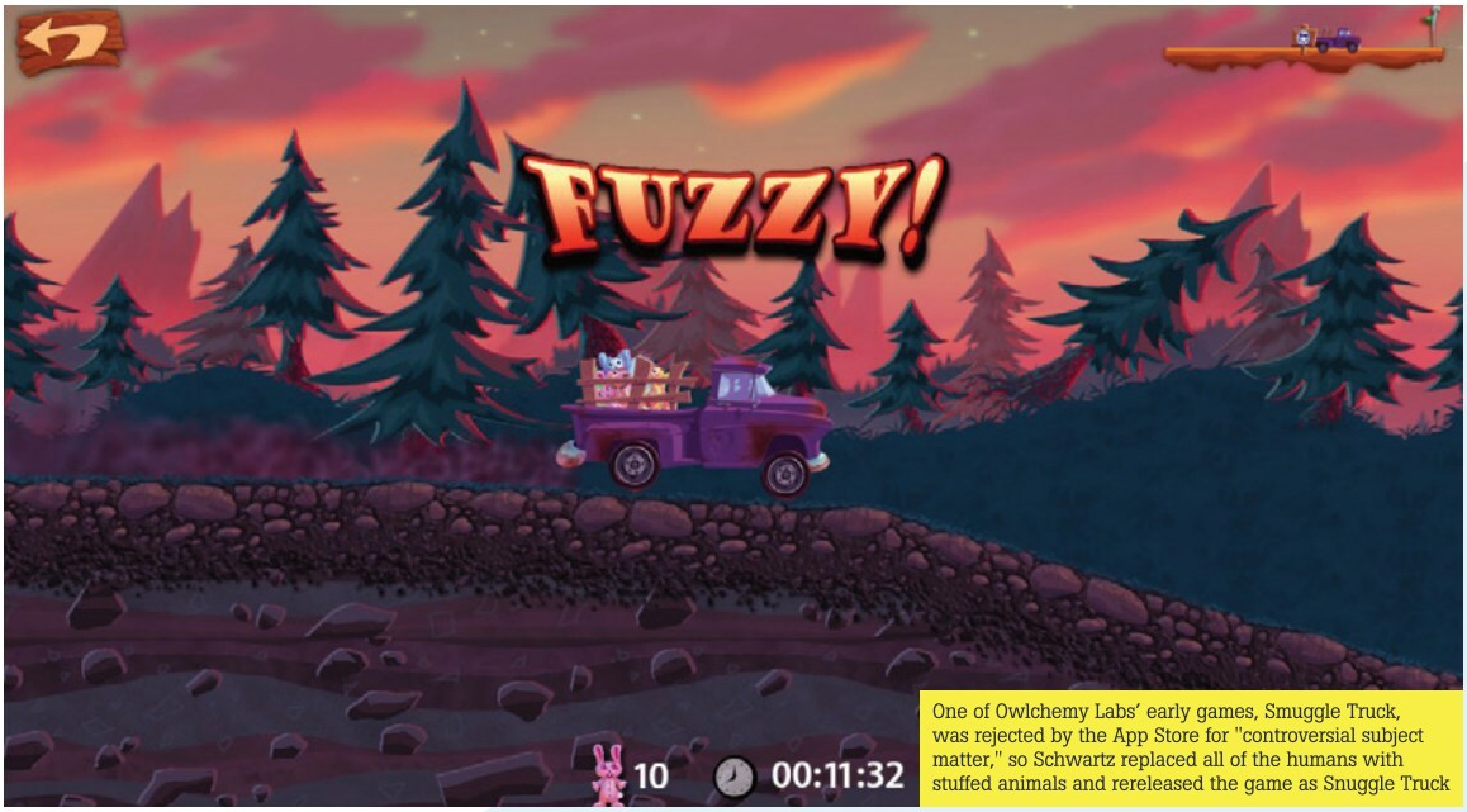
"It was 2013 when it became clear that that premium mobile market was dying," Scott adds. "It was becoming a strange beast. Even now, you can't follow the successes from two years ago. You can't follow those rules because the industry is constantly changing. That was something we were learning. I think both of us felt like we were a year or two too late to release a three-dollar game or even a five-dollar game on iOS that would even make its money back."

Half a decade after the release of the iPhone, the mobile market was awash with clones, reskins, and other low-effort shovelware. In some cases, the clones were actually making more money than the originals, which famously happened to number-based puzzle game Threes in 2014. Schwartz and Scott felt that it was nearly impossible for the average game developer to get noticed without a million-dollar marketing budget. As young indie developers struggling to pay the rent, Schwartz and Scott were growing disillusioned.

Then they had a crazy idea. If the system had stopped working for them, maybe they could just work the system.



Ziba Scott's Girls Like Robots released in October of 2012 to favorable reviews, but didn't sell significantly well



One of Owlchemy Labs' early games, Smuggle Truck, was rejected by the App Store for "controversial subject matter," so Schwartz replaced all of the humans with stuffed animals and rereleased the game as Snuggle Truck

QUANTITY OVER QUALITY

Every January, MIT helps host the Global Game Jam, the world's largest game jam, which takes place at multiple locations around the world. While teams of programmers and artists beat their heads trying to come up with one "perfect idea," Schwartz and Scott giggled in a corner and asked themselves, "How can we do worse?"

The two developers had often joked about how they could reskin and clone their own games and flood the mobile marketplace. Now they were ready to actually do it. But first, they needed to make a game that was incredibly simple and easy to clone. Schwartz and Scott never intended to spend a lot of time or effort on a project like this. Cutting corners was not only encouraged, it was a mantra. Ultimately, the designers decided that they didn't even need to make the game themselves – they could just download and repackage some prebuilt program off the Unity Asset Store. Reskinning and cloning a game they hadn't even made felt like one gigantic corner to cut. It was perfect. Schwartz and Scott hopped online and bought a slot-machine game for $14.99. The duo didn't know it yet, but they would eventually see a massive return on that investment.

"Slot-machine games seemed like the perfect fit, because they have such a low barrier to entry," Scott says. "There aren't many games simpler than pressing a button that says good or bad. You can hardly abstract the concept of a game any further than that."

"Slot-machines are the one world where there is already an entire industry built around reskins, and no one gives a s---," Schwartz adds. "Walking through Vegas, you see hundreds of different slot-machines. You walk past Cleopatra slots and then Wheel of Fortune slots, there are even Fruit Ninja slots. It's such a weird world that we didn't understand, but we knew that humans seem drawn to them in some way."

Once Schwartz and Scott had a working game, they set to work making copies. They added new background images, in-game "about" descriptions, and a custom theme song. Their slot games were of admittedly low quality, but they had taken less than an afternoon to cobble together. Future clones would take only a fraction of that time.

Scott wrote a Unity editor script that automatically grabbed images off the web, swiped an about blurb from Wikipedia, and then used a text-to-speech program to generate new lyrics to their electronic theme song. At this point, all Schwartz and Scott had to do was type a theme into their Unity editor and the program would spit out a new slot-machine. Before long, they had dozens of slot games with titles as absurd as Lobster Slots, Richard III Slots, and Harlem Shake Slots.

The designers then took the hundred-plus games they had made and published them onto the Google Play store. They marveled at the fact that a few people actually downloaded them and laughed over the smattering of bad reviews. At this point, Schwartz and Scott's silly experiment seemed like a success. They didn't know what it proved, but releasing a glut of low-quality games onto Google's marketplace felt like a snarky middle finger to the industry and its rising tide of low-quality content that was drowning out premium mobile products dedicated developers had poured their blood, sweat, and tears into. Their curiosity satisfied, Schwartz and Scott walked away and forgot about their little experiment.

Over the next several months, while quietly unobserved, their games continued to accrue downloads.

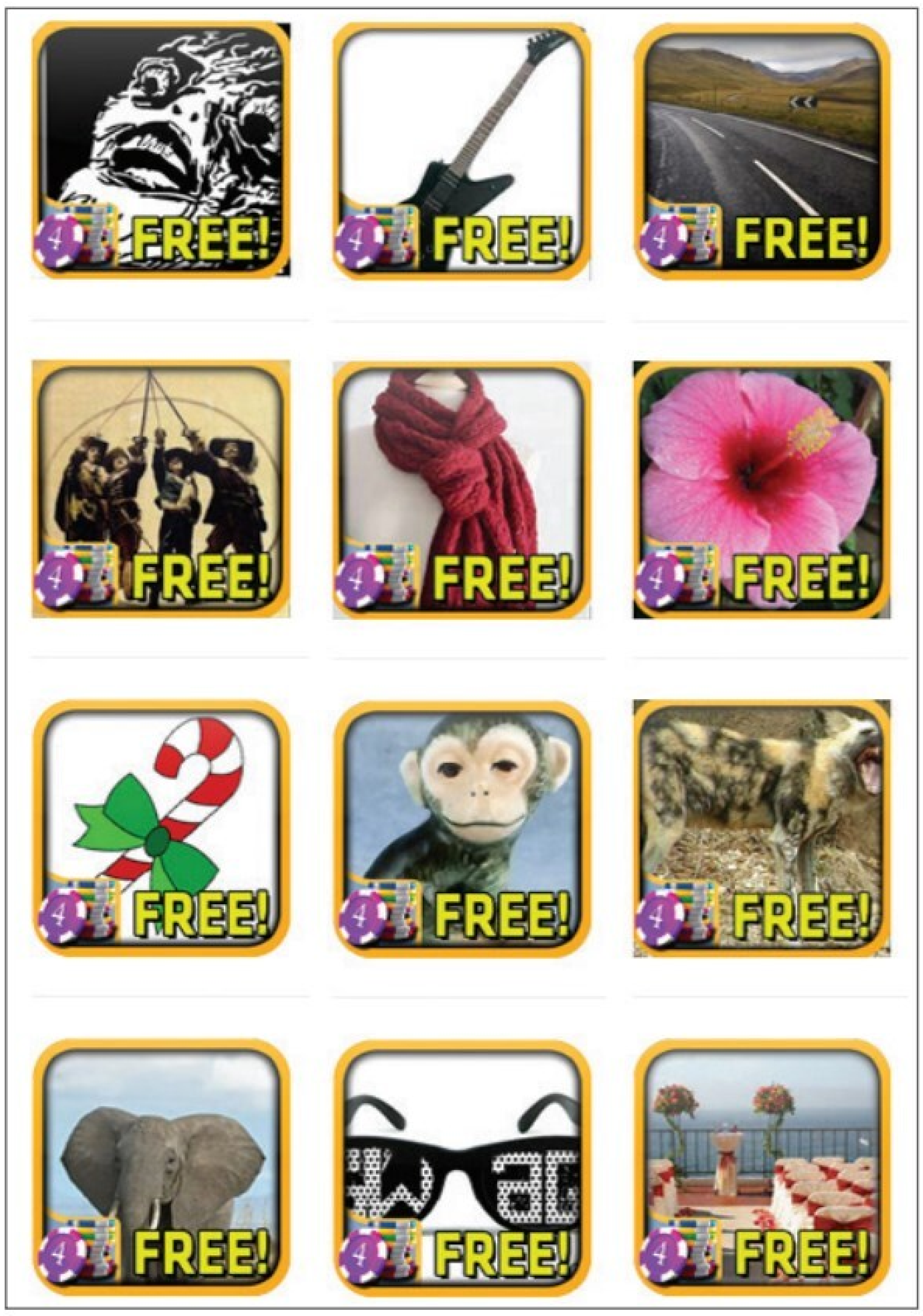
DOUBLING DOWN

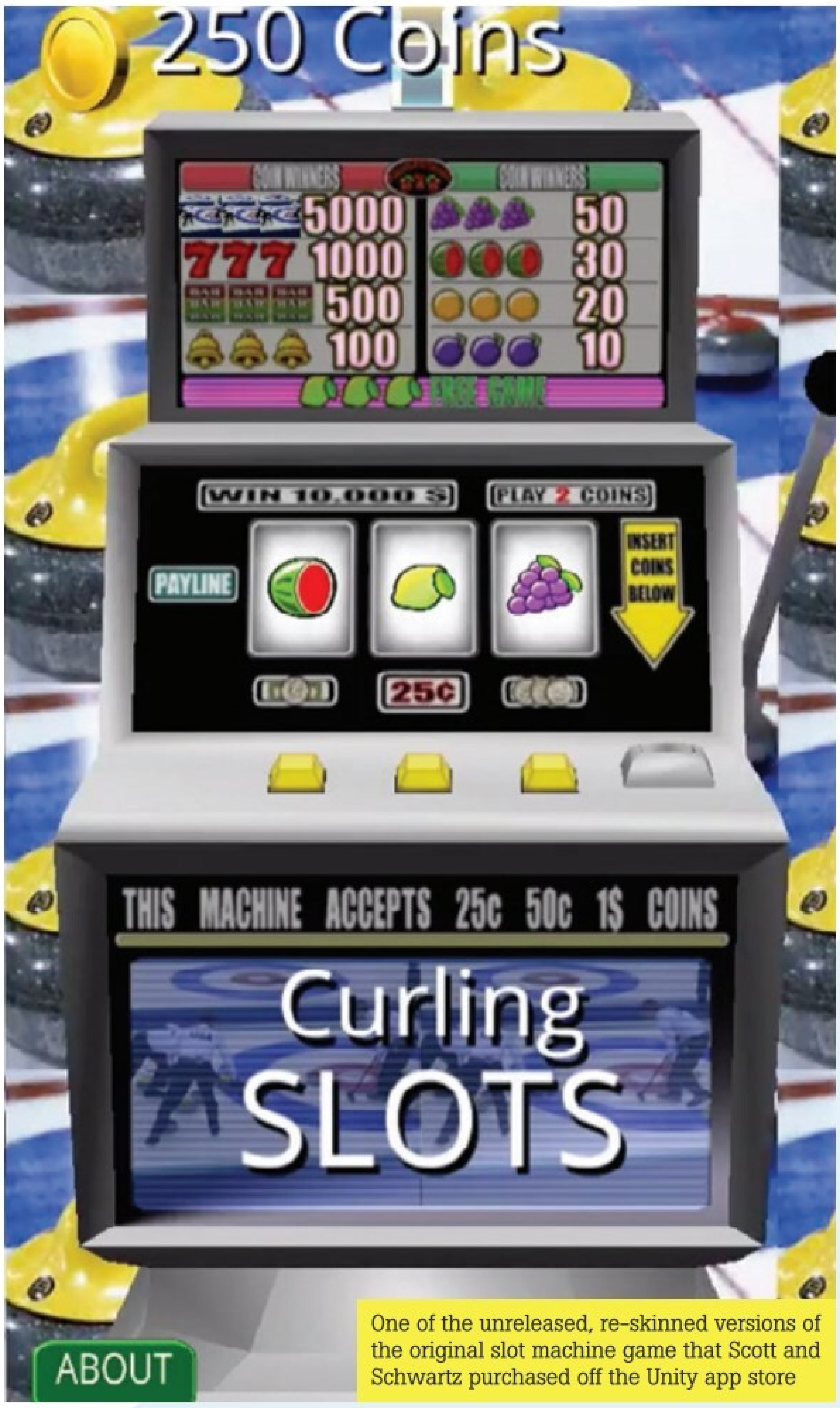
After the Christmas break of 2013, Schwartz and Scott returned to check up on their slot-machine experiment. They were startled by their discovery. All of Schwartz and Scott's games were free to download, but like most free games, these slot games featured integrated advertising. It was almost a joke. One of the most annoying aspects of the mobile market were the "gacha" free-to-play games that roped players into watching one ad after another for another spin at the wheel. Schwartz and Scott were trying to mock those types of games; they hardly expected to make money on the ads in their own crappy games.

"A lot of times app stores have a bump over the holidays and we wondered what happened," Schwartz says. "We saw that our downloads had gone way up, but then we checked our ad network backend and saw that in January and throughout the holidays we were making over $200 a day."

"It's hard not to look at a few hundred bucks a day that took no work and not draw a line from $200 to millions twinkling in our eyes somewhere," Scott says.

Schwartz and Scott didn't need any more encouragement to fire up their automated workshop again. But this time, they were ready to take things to the next level, so they incorporated under the name Signal to Noise. The pair even came up with a cutesy tagline, "We are the noise."





One of the unreleased, re-skinned versions of the original slot machine game that Scott and Schwartz purchased off the Unity app store

Making slot games was a snap, but there were a few speed bumps to Schwartz and Scott's automated system. It took several minutes to fill out all the forms to submit a game for publishing on Google's App store, and the pair still had to sit down and brainstorm new themes for future slot games. Sure, typing in a new theme took seconds, but they felt that even this process could be automated.

To solve the first problem of submitting games for publishing, Scott used a web-automation tool that played back browser-based interactions. This allowed him to record the inputs for filling out the developer agreements needed to submit a game to Google's Play Store. To solve the second problem of generating ideas, Schwartz and Scott had Google Trends feed their system relevant news and celebrity gossip, which resulted in games likes Deer Antler Spray Slots and John Boehner Slots. Next, they downloaded massive lists of words and coded a formula that took random adjectives and paired them with random nouns. This program spit out a stream of nonsensical slot-machine ideas like Stupid Pumpkin Slots, Tremendous Face Pain Slots, and Inexperienced Great Horned Owl Slots. "We had reduced the gap between conceiving a game to publishing it to market to typing a single word and hitting enter," Scott says.

After a few months of tinkering, Schwartz and Scott had developed an automated system that could be accessed via Wi-Fi from any country in the world. They had visions of sipping drinks on the beach while periodically checking in on their slot-machine empire. The duo nicknamed their system The Goose, as in the fabled bird that laid golden eggs. Before long, The Goose was churning out and publishing games at an insane clip. In fact, Schwartz and Scott were amassing more games than they could ever publish; Google actually restricts developers from publishing more than 15 games a day. But even with this artificial restriction, after its first year Signal to Noise had already submitted nearly 750 games to the Google Play Store. Most games only got a few hundred to a thousand downloads, but even the least successful slot-machines contributed to Signal to Noises' overall downloads, and ultimately ad impressions.

"One month, we looked at the drip income of Owlchemy's entire portfolio," Schwartz says. "I remember that Slots, this low-effort garbage pile, was somehow bringing in more money than the past four years of my creative endeavors. That was a real laugh-while-crying kinda moment. I went, 'What the f--- are we doing with our lives if this joke has started to supersede true effort?' … I almost didn't want it to make money, because it proved that it's more effort to make games the right way. There was a feeling of it shouldn't be this easy, because it proves that, as a society, people are not as discerning with quality as we had hoped."

$ WALKING AWAY FROM A WINNING HAND

On a good month, Schwartz and Scott wouldn't even interact with The Goose and they could watch the ad revenue roll in. But eventually, The Goose always needed attention. Schwartz and Scott had built a fragile scaffolding with several points of failure. Their entire automated system relied on over a dozen different online services, from Google to Wikipedia to small web-based freeware. When Google Images caused problems for their automated system, they had to switch over to Bing's image search. When Google Play required game submissions to include high-res images, they had to update their photo capture system. When Unity changed its privacy policy, a country altered its laws on gambling apps, or a checkbox on Google's publishing forms shifted even 10 pixels to the left, The Goose would grind to a halt and the system had to be updated. Fixing these problems was rarely complicated, but The Goose needed the occasional greasing.

The bigger issue was that Signal to Noise had started as a joke, but it had grown into something larger – something unfulfilling. "I was constantly torn between pride and amusement and a sense that I should be doing something else," Scott says.

"There was a joke here, where if the mobile market was more sustainable for premium content, then we wouldn't have had to lower ourselves to following through on this joke idea," Schwartz adds.

When Google started to implement systems that made it difficult for cloners like Signal to Noise, Schwartz and Scott ultimately decided to walk away from their project. On March 19, 2017, after more than four years, 1,500 slot-machine games, and over 1.6 million downloads, Signal to Noise published its last game: 3D Astronomer Slots – Free.

To be clear, Schwartz and Scott didn't shut down their automated system, they just stopped updating it and let The Goose die a slow death. They left the keys in the car and let it slowly roll into a ditch. Surprisingly, The Goose lived far longer than either Schwartz or Scott had expected. Today, Signal to Noise's entire portfolio of games has been suspended by Google for failure to keep up with the latest updates. Even so, as of this printing, Schwartz and Scott are still scraping in a small amount of ad revenue from users who occasionally fire up the apps still lingering on their phones.

GDC
1500 SLOT MACHINES
WALK INTO A BAR
Adventures in Quantity Over Quality

BIG PAYOUT

Fortunately, these days, Schwartz and Scott don't have to play the slot game to make money, and both developers have found some of the indie development success they yearned for. In 2016, Scott used Fig to successfully crowdfund Make Sail, a physics-based construction adventure, and the game is currently in early access. Meanwhile, in 2017, Schwartz's company Owlchemy Labs was purchased by Google, and Schwartz has spun off once again to form another, currently unnamed, indie game company.

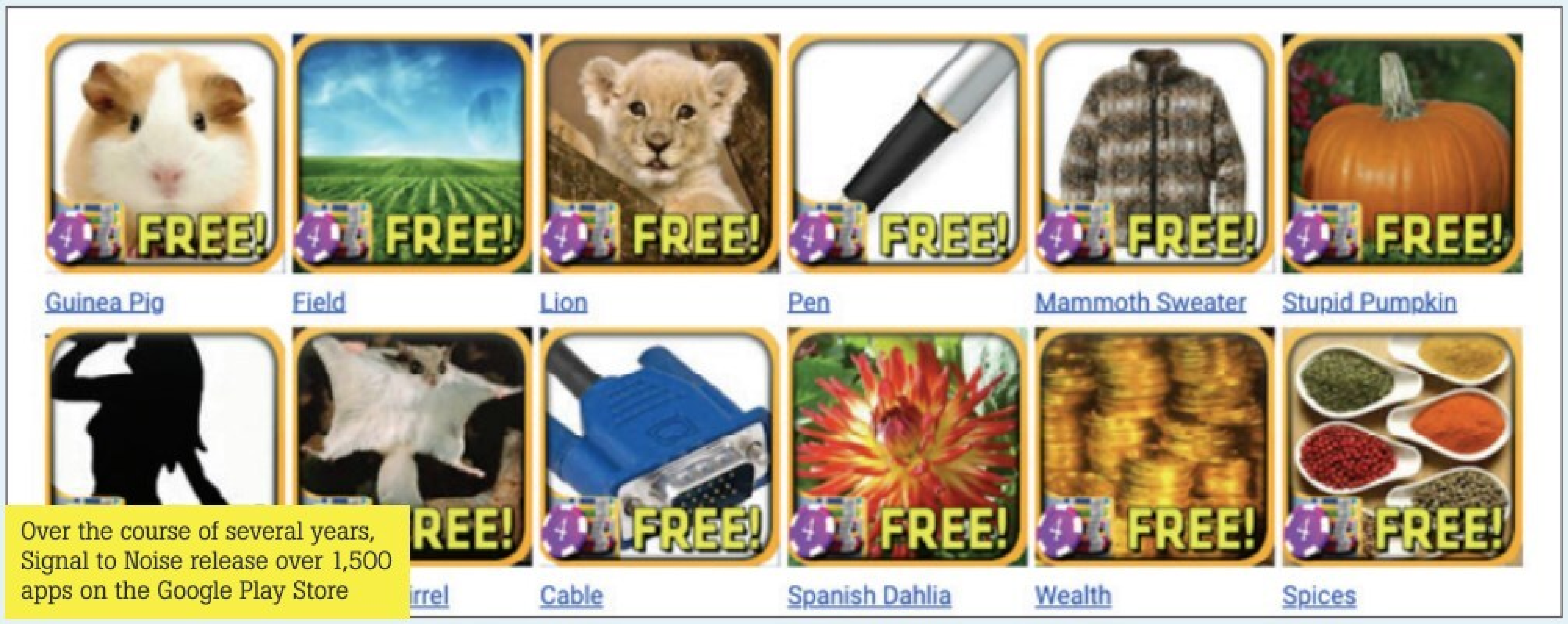
Both Schwartz and Scott say Google has made it more difficult for developers to flood the market with the types of automated clones that they released, but that doesn't mean the mobile market has become more friendly to developers, or users for that matter. App stores are still brimming with clones and ad-driven shovelware that make it hard for premium titles to be discovered. This problem isn't localized to the mobile space, either. As online stores like Steam continue to open up and make it easier for anyone with a computer to publish software to the platform, developers will continue to find ways to exploit those systems.

"It's interesting how this experiment tied into my ideas on curation," Schwartz says. "This is the logical outcome to a completely open, uncurated platform. Quality goes down, people think of various schemes to flood the market, and consumers are left with a low-quality experience overall. I feel very passionately that consumers should have a curated experience. So this was us jumping over the tiniest of tiny fences to go muck around in an open ecosystem to show people how bad things are, and how bad they can be."

If Schwartz is to be believed, then maybe the problem isn't with the kinds of developers who churn out endless clones and other low quality software. And the problem might not be the consumers who find themselves lost in a sea of likeminded apps that constantly demand their eyeballs. The problem is likely the systems platform holders have built that allow for this level of exploitation. Some developers are trying to stem this tide. Valve has taken a player-driven approach to discoverability, allowing user reviews and trends to drive many of Steam's algorithms, but as more new games flood the market, developers continue to complain about getting lost in the sea. Online stores are full of garbage, but who's cleaning up the trash?

If anything, experiments like Signal to Noise expose the inefficacies of our current online markets, and offer a peek into one potential future where automation spirals out of control.

Today, the internet is crawling with automated bots that do everything from sending emails to leaving consumer reviews to responding to Twitter comments. It's easy to get lost in the cacophony. Tomorrow, bots are already learning how to make, publish, and even promote games. What happens next is still up to us. ◆



Over the course of several years, Signal to Noise release over 1,500 apps on the Google Play Store

IS STREAMING THE FUTURE FOR GAMING?

IT’S COMPLICATED

by Matt Bertz

Platform holders are investing millions into game streaming technology, but don't expect widespread adoption until the major players overcome these hurdles

The game-streaming gold rush is on. Ten years after OnLive first debuted and four years after it went down in flames, a new round of serious players are stepping up in hopes of making the dream of streaming top-tier video games to any device a reality.

The list of competitors is a murderer's row of technology giants. Microsoft revealed Project xCloud last year, a prototype game-streaming service built on the back of its Azure cloud computing infrastructure that most expect to play a major role in the future of Xbox. Sony already has PlayStation Now streaming in place. Google revealed its Stadia platform at this past Game Developer's Conference, and companies like Amazon, Nvidia, Electronic Arts, and Verizon are all reported to have game-streaming technology in various phases of development.

The advantages to the platform holders are plentiful. Game-streaming platforms destroy any threat of used-game markets and piracy. They eliminate the upfront cost of retail distribution. They potentially create a more reliable revenue stream with subscription plans. They allow platform holders to scrape an unprecedented amount of data about the way people play. Plus, publishers can still pack games with microtransactions to drive up the bottom line. For these companies, what's not to love?

As with any platform race, pricing and game selection will play a pivotal role in the success or failure of these endeavors. But before any of these services have a chance of succeeding, the companies must overcome some pre-existing technological and cultural roadblocks that could slow adoption and (at worst) paint game-streaming as fool's gold and relegate these platforms to the dustbin of history alongside other failed attempts. Here are the biggest challenges facing game-streaming today.

THE LATENCY CONUNDRUM

The big buzzword when talking about the viability of game-streaming platforms is latency. To have a good game-playing experience with consistent visual fidelity and minimal input lag, you need stable bandwidth and low latency, which is basically how fast the data transfers between the cloud server and your device of choice. Some latency is a given, just as it exists right now between your console/PC and your monitor, television, and controller. The real challenge is making that latency imperceptible to the average user.

Companies with vast data centers like Google, Microsoft, and Amazon are in the best position to try and fight latency. In addition to the parent company's massive server farms, Google Stadia VP Phil Harrison says the company has 7,500 node locations throughout the world to shorten the touchpoint between the gamer and game, as well as world-class compression and a controller that communicates directly with the data centers via Wi-Fi rather than being routed through the browser.

All those talking points sound convincing, but during our GDC hands-on demo session in controlled conditions with Doom (2016) running on Stadia, *Game Informer* news editor Imran Khan felt the lag was still "noticeable, but not ruinous." Single-player games with forgiving combat, turn-based strategy titles, and simulation games may run just fine in this environment if streaming companies can replicate these demos in the real world. But the biggest test is how latency holds up in responsive games where control fidelity is at a premium. Racing games, twitchy platformers, fighting games, first-person shooters, and sports games will likely never perform as well as they do on home systems, considering the data has to travel to a server center miles away and back several times every second. Casual consumers may not notice the delay, but any tangible lag will make it much harder to attract the hardcore audience.

A cursory view of Twitch on any given

19 regions
58 zones
200+ countries & territories

Google believes its server infrastructure puts it in a good place to minimize latency day shows the most popular games to watch on the planet tend to be competition-focused titles like Fortnite, League of Legends, Dota 2, PUBG, Counter-Strike, Overwatch, and FIFA. If lag is noticeable to the naked eye (or on the controller) when playing these games on streaming platforms, then luring competitive gamers, streamers, and power-users – who buy the latest mice, keyboards, controllers, monitors, and televisions to combat even the slightest bit of latency – could prove difficult. If you can't lure the influencers and esports athletes who potential consumers aspire to be, you may have a harder time convincing them that game-streaming services are the way to go.

DATA CAP DANGERS

Our relationships with Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have gotten more complicated in recent years, with the repeal of net neutrality and bandwidth usage pushing us toward pre-established data caps. A few years ago, the primary element factoring into your internet bill was the speed of your service. If you aren't monitoring your web traffic these days, you run the risk of burning through your allotted bandwidth usage and incurring additional fees.

Even though bandwidth pipelines are in no danger of being clogged in any real sense, ISPs follow a simple, if arbitrary, logic when it comes to data caps: Those who use internet more should pay more. With the millions of Americans cutting the cord to their cable providers, subscribing to a multitude of video streaming services like Netflix and HBO Now, playing games online, and enabling smart home functionality, we're burning through bandwidth faster than ever.

Right now, major ISPs like AT&T and Comcast have a 1TB data usage cap for their base customers. If you go over the limit, you incur $10 charges for every additional 50GB. Many *Game Informer* editors found this out the hard way when downloading 4K texture packs for games after adopting the Xbox One X. Add game streaming to this equation, and things could get ugly.

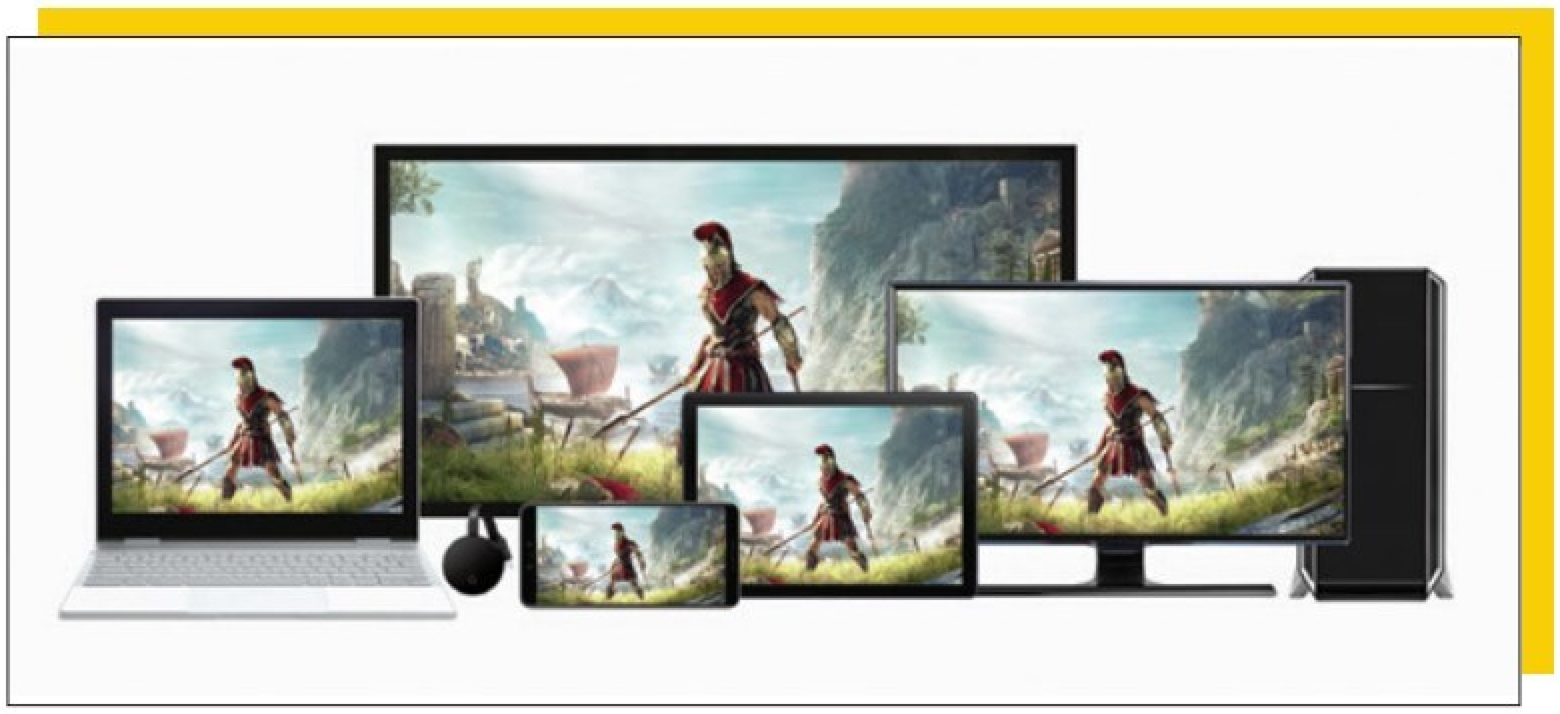
If a Stadia user is playing a game with 4K graphics at 60fps, they would burn through roughly 13.5GB of data per hour. Playing games a couple of hours each day burns through 80 percent of that monthly 1TB threshold on game streaming alone, and that's before even factoring in regular web usage, music streaming, video streaming, or any other service taking up bandwidth.

This could be the hidden cost that sinks the appeal of game-streaming platforms if something doesn't change. When asked about this potential roadblock, Harrison says he thinks ISPs may change their thresholds to account for the massive spike in traffic. "I think ISPs have been really proactive and somewhat responsive as well to the reality of the market," he says. "When music went to streaming, bandwidth caps lifted. When video TV went to streaming, caps lifted, and I think we'll continue to see that evolution."

THE EVER-PRESENT DIGITAL DIVIDE

Google's stated ambitions for Stadia are lofty – to "bring the best games to everyone in the world." No longer restricted by the traditional boundaries of console ownership or the need for a high-end PC to play the latest games, this goal seems more achievable with game-streaming services. However, "everyone" has a giant asterisk next to it, because the potential audience needs to have a stable broadband connection, something the majority of people on the planet still don't have.

According to Akamai's most recent State of the Internet report, in 2017 only 45 percent of the global population had access to internet pipelines faster than 10 megabits per second (Mbps). That number will continue to grow as companies build out broadband infrastructure across the globe, but adoption still faces some major hurdles, even in first-world countries like the United States.



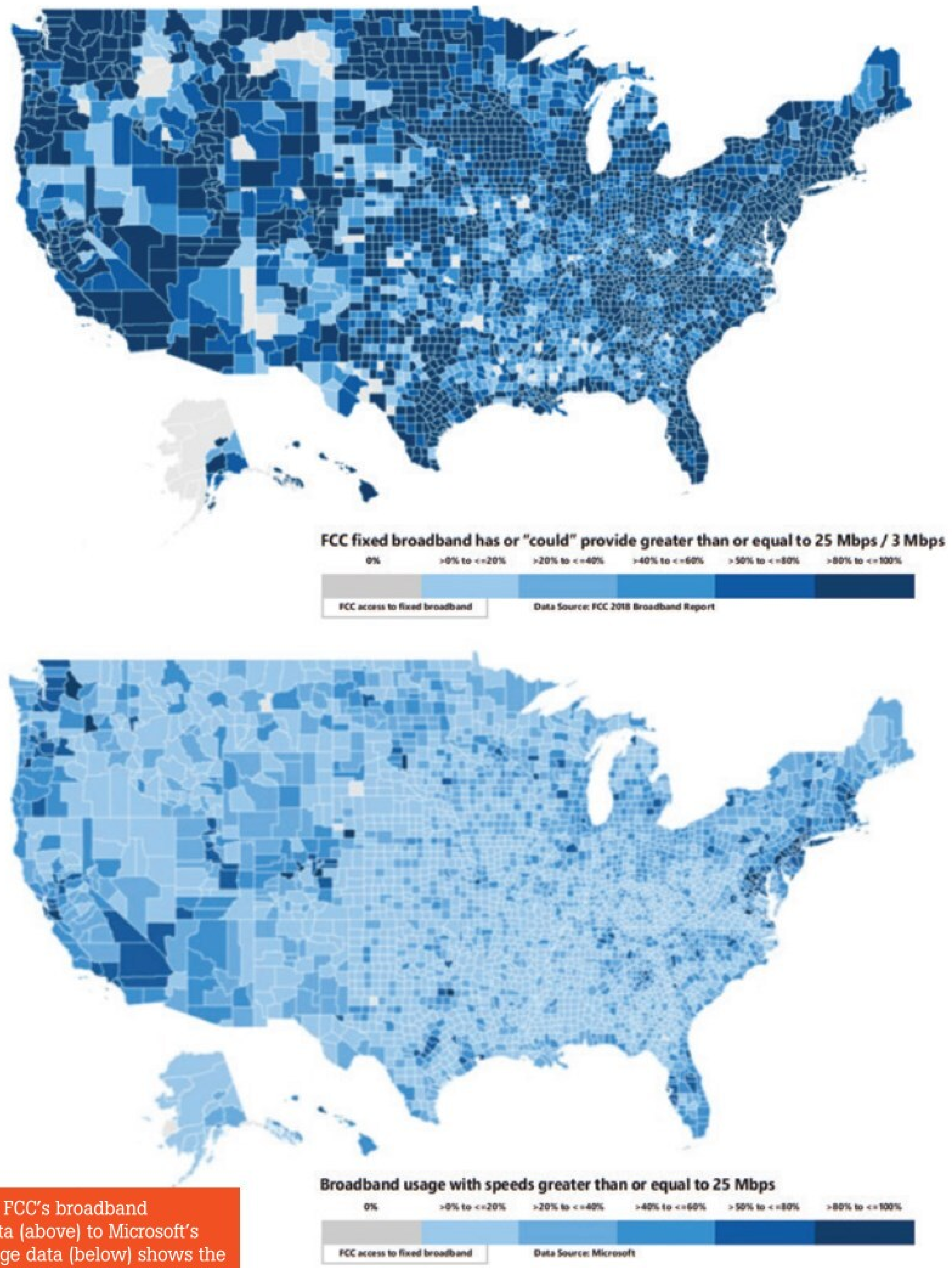
How many Americans currently have access to broadband services? Depends on who you ask. In a draft of the 2019 Broadband Deployment Report, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) stated the digital divide between those who do and don't have access to broadband services has decreased from 26.1 million Americans at the end of 2016 to 19.4 million at the end of 2017. Subsequent investigations have found those numbers to be inflated due to inaccurate reporting from ISPs. Moreover, just because people have access to broadband doesn't mean they use it. Microsoft's internal data suggests that 163 million of the 327 million Americans "do not use the internet at broadband speeds." That's a vast gulf.

FCC chairman Ajit Pai has argued in recent years that the net neutrality policy put in place by the previous administration was preventing telecommunications companies from investing in broadband network investment to cross the digital divide. But after the repeal, ISPs have not increased their capital spending like Pai predicted. In fact, Comcast, Verizon, and Charter all lowered their capital expenditures last year.

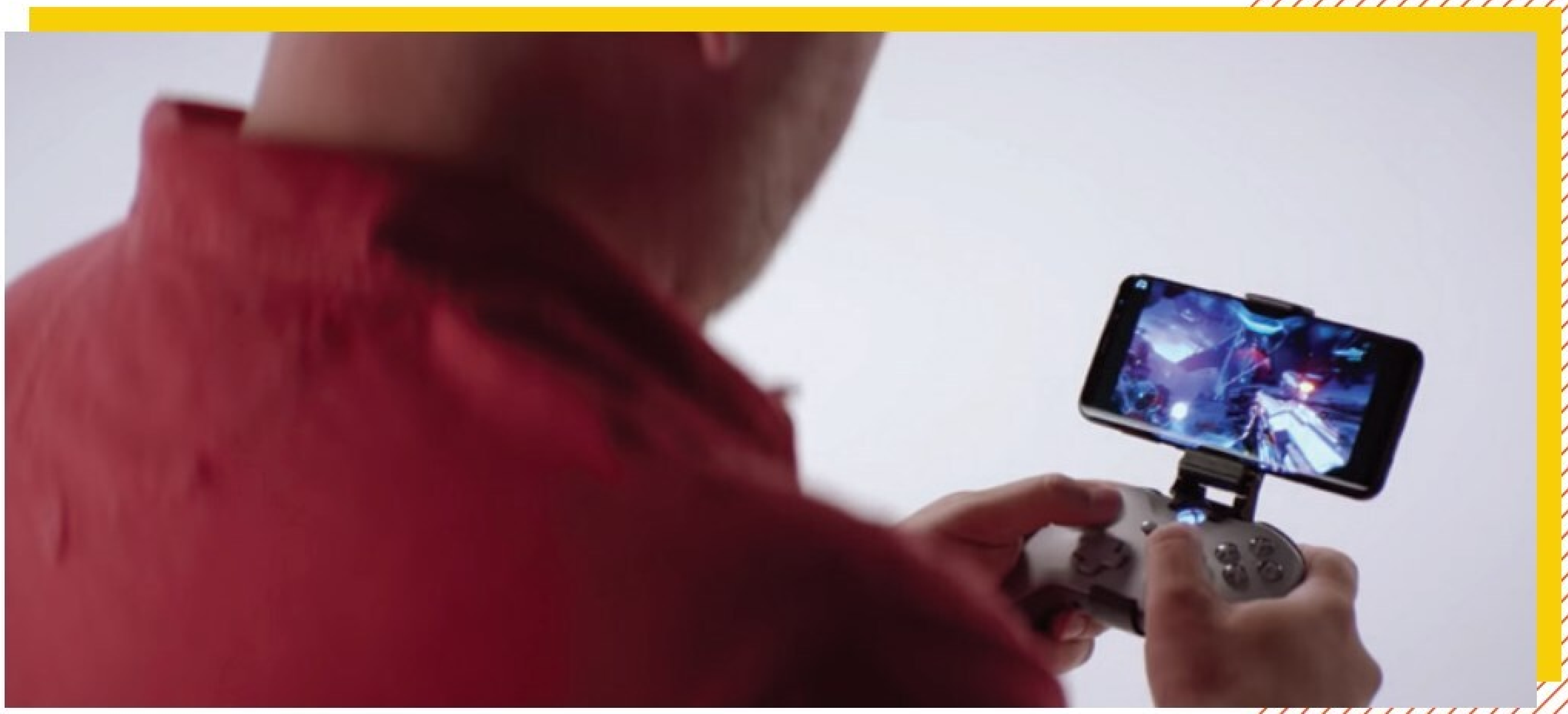
Wireless carriers have argued that 5G – the next evolution of mobile networks – could be the solution to providing broadband-level speeds to rural dead zones. The theoretical speeds are certainly eye-popping – whereas 4G can achieve 100Mbps speeds in perfect conditions, 5G increases speculative output to a whopping 10 gigabits per second (Gbps). However, many issues factor into whether or not these speeds are actually achievable in the real world. For instance, the radio spectrum 5G uses doesn't travel easily through buildings, so network providers need to invest in placing small base stations throughout dense areas if they want to provide consistently fast speeds.

The 5G networks are just starting to roll out, so we won't have concrete data on realistic speeds for some time, but after reviewing 5G data from recent test markets, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) argued that "without a comprehensive plan for fiber infrastructure, 5G will not revolutionize Internet access or speeds for rural customers."

Targeting the hundreds of millions of people who currently have broadband speeds in their homes gives game-streaming services a large pool of potential customers out of the gate – one that dwarfs the install bases of the modern consoles. But it's going to be quite some time before they can realize the altruistic goal of "bringing games to everyone." In the meantime, people living in rural areas without access to broadband will be left out in the cold.


FCC fixed broadband has or "could" provide greater than or equal to 25 Mbps / 3 Mbps
0%
>0% to <=20%
>20% to <=40%
>40% to <=60%
>50% to <=80%
>80% to <=100%
FCC access to fixed broadband
Data Source: FCC 2018 Broadband Report
Broadband usage with speeds greater than or equal to 25 Mbps
0%
>0% to <=20%
>20% to <=40%
>40% to <=60%
>50% to <=80%
>80% to <=100%
FCC access to fixed broadband
Data Source: Microsoft

Comparing the FCC's broadband penetration data (above) to Microsoft's broadband usage data (below) shows the digital divide is bigger than we thought



FRAGMENTATION FATIGUE

Late last year, Epic Games announced its intention to challenge Steam's supremacy as a digital marketplace for PC games. On the surface, the Fortnite creator's approach seemed hard to root against. Epic promised to give developers a larger cut of the revenue and a more curated storefront with less competition. Some publishers even passed those savings onto the player, with Metro Exodus selling for $10 less than it was originally listed at on Steam before becoming exclusive to the Epic Games Store. Then the backlash started.

Rather than celebrate the savings, a groundswell of protesters roared in disapproval over having to download a new launcher. The idea of cultivating yet another friends list and losing features like cloud saves, mods, and achievements just to play titles that would typically be available on Steam was a bridge too far. Campaigns sprung up to boycott Epic Games Store, even if it meant missing out on exclusives like The Division 2 and Metro Exodus. Other games that announced exclusivity plans, like The Outer Worlds and Borderlands 3, were met with similar derision, with the developers suffering review-bombing for their other titles on Steam in retaliation.

Brand allegiance is real, and many gaming communities are more entrenched now than ever before. Given how multiplayer-centric many games are these days, asking a player to abandon their friends to jump to a brand new platform isn't easy. This won't pose a problem for entrenched companies offering game-streaming services like Sony and Microsoft. But newcomers like Google, Nvidia, Amazon, and Verizon likely face a steep uphill battle in this regard.

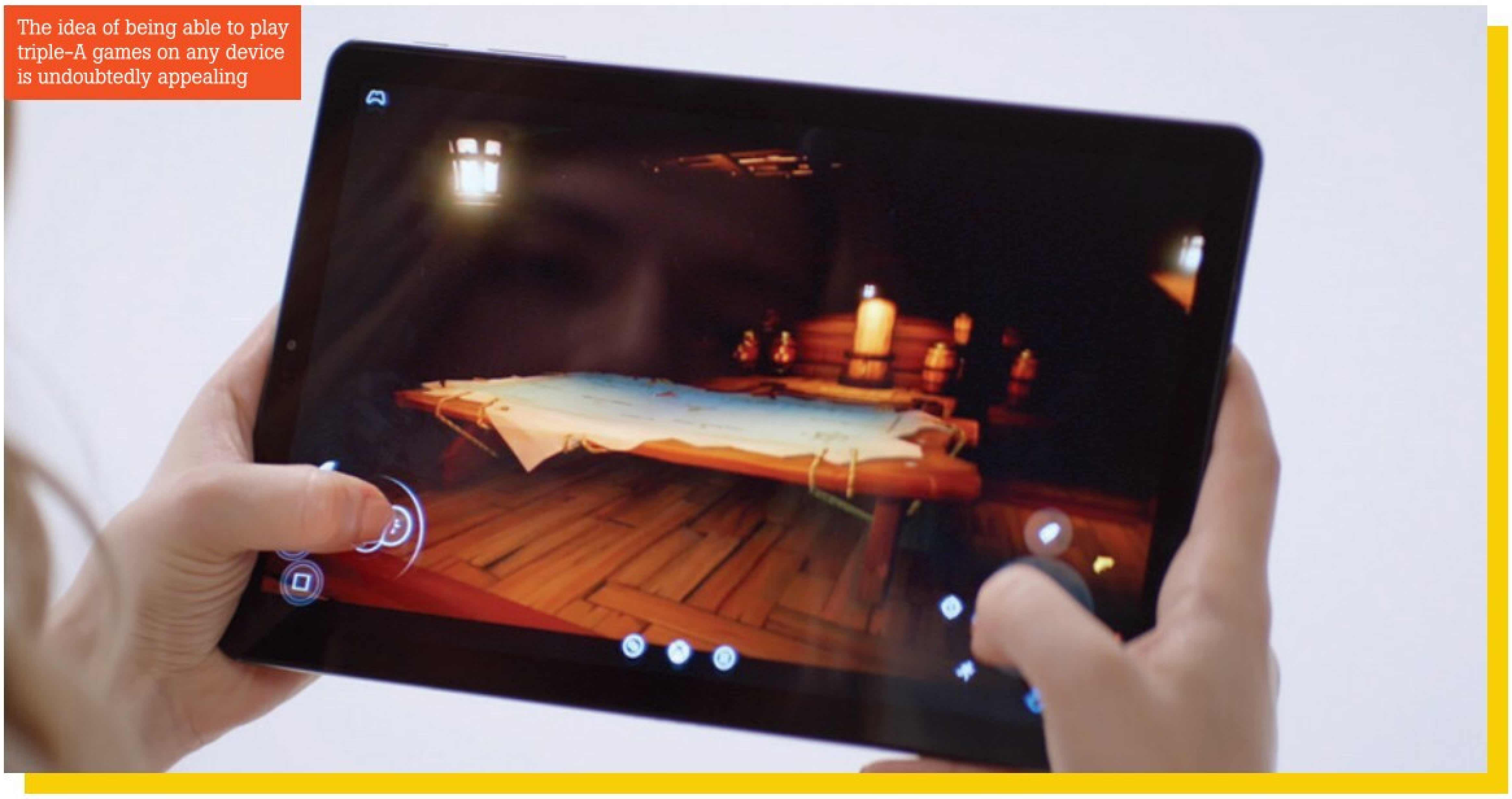
Google tried to cut this potential problem off at the pass by announcing Stadia' commitment to supporting cross-platform play, but at this juncture we have no idea whether Steam, Epic Games Store, PlayStation, or Xbox are entertaining this overture. Since they own the popular streaming platforms Twitch and YouTube, respectively, Amazon and Google will undoubtedly lean hard into these pre-existing communities to attract their initial customer base. It wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility for these companies to offer free trials for Amazon Prime or YouTube Premium/TV users.

Newcomers also face skepticism related to the earnestness of these endeavors in the long term. Tech giants are no strangers to pulling the plug early and walking away from highly touted but underperforming endeavors like the Amazon Fire phone, Google+ social networking platform, and Nvidia Shield tablet/Shield Portable. Savvy consumers remember these false starts, and knowledge of that skittishness could may make them think twice about uprooting their game communities to join a new service. Many may ultimately stay where they're at until the these proposed streaming platforms prove their viability over a longer time period.

BUILDING BEYOND THE HYPE

None of the potential game streaming roadblocks outlined above are deal breakers on their own. If companies properly build out infrastructure they very well may reduce latency so the majority of players aren't bothered by it. Broadband penetration will continue to rise in the coming years around the globe, and perhaps ISPs will succumb to pressure and lift data caps instead of price gouging customers. Fragmentation fatigue could be avoided altogether if these platforms deliver unique experiences gamers can't get anywhere else and thus compel them to jump on board.

But taken together, these problems give enough pause to wonder aloud if the timing is right for streaming to become a predominant choice for gamers in the immediate future. We'll find out soon enough.


The idea of being able to play triple-A games on any device is undoubtedly appealing

THE WALKING DEAD: THE FINAL SEASON

Four seasons and seven years later, we finally said goodbye to Clementine. Sadly, we also said goodbye to the studio that created her. Amid the second episode's launch, Telltale shuttered without warning. With two episodes left to go, Skybound Games stepped in and hired ex-Telltalers who were available to finish it off. We spoke with creative director Kent Mudle about coming back and giving Clementine the ending he felt she deserved. *by Kimberley Wallace*

Note: This interview contains major spoilers for the final season.

What was the state of the final season when you moved over to Skybound Games? How much of it was complete in terms of design and voice acting?
When Telltale shut down, episode three was in almost dead mid-production. We had all the voices recorded, the visuals were already in an okay state, with the idea that there would be another month of production to get to the final product. The fourth episode, we had just finished the first script and the first round of voice recordings. The actual overall creative plan for the season and how episode four was going to end was set in stone and approved by Skybound. We made some changes to episode four based on our own internal discussions to make it better, but the ending was already agreed on, even before we shut down and transitioned from Telltale ownership to Skybound ownership.

Why do you think people have gravitated to Clementine so much over the years?
I think Clem works so well in the first season and captured so many people's hearts because The Walking Dead by its nature is such a bleak tale of people struggling, dying, and trying to do the right thing but never really making it. Clementine is "hope" for a little girl that can grow up and come to terms with living in a world much harsher than what we live in. That simple symbol of hope is so powerful that people just latched on, and Clementine herself kind of became the brand of The Walking Dead. She's the focus and what everyone comes back for in the Telltale series. She represents that maybe there is a possibility for a happy ending and things to work out, as we've watched this little girl fight so hard.

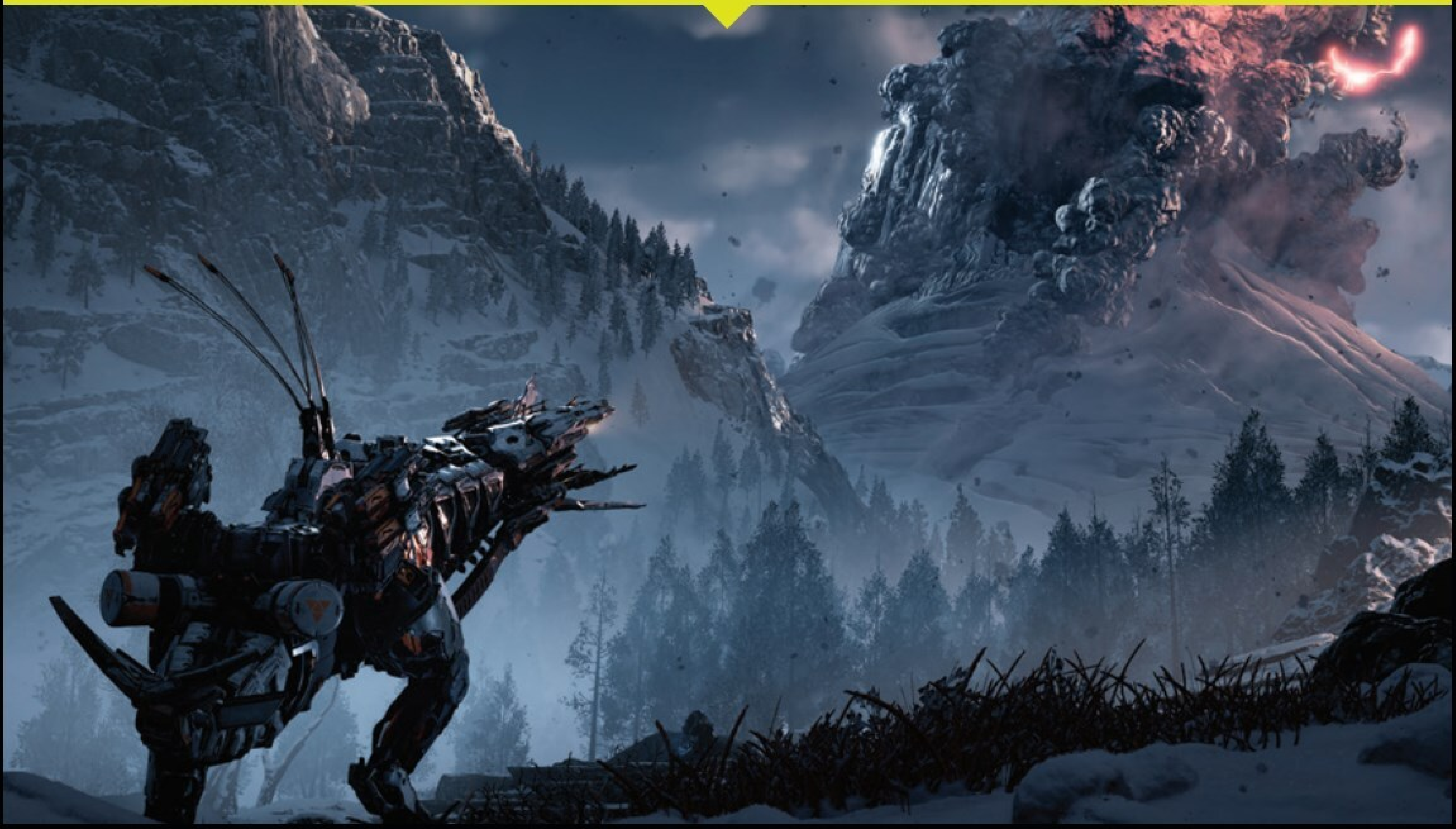
The Walking Dead had a big impact on the industry, especially with its episodic structure. Do you feel like episodic games can still thrive now, in a time where binge-watching is such a popular way to consume media?
I don't really have quite enough business sense to know for sure, but I do know at Telltale we were right about to move away from episodic games. There was a time where there was a cultural impact of keeping the conversation going longer between episodes that was worth it. We enjoyed that aspect, but I think production wise it would have been something that was easier to put out in a complete package. Telltale managed it for a while, but I didn't see it becoming a trend. Everyone is expecting to get all the content now, and I think that's how it's going to be consumed unless something changes drastically in the media landscape.

This season you brought back Lily, who we hadn't seen since that horrifying moment in the first season. What went into the decision to bring her back?
We knew for the final season that we wanted to bring back a season one character because the point of the season is coming back to close the arc that started in season one. The only real [options] were either Lily or Christa. Christa is a more sympathetic character and I didn't think that was going to have a place in the season, but Lily's an antagonistic force. Clementine kept her hope throughout the apocalypse, but Lily lost it and decided to almost abandon her humanity in order to keep the people she cares about alive. It was interesting to showcase the contrast between Clementine and Lily, because they've both lived the same amount of time in the apocalypse, but their journeys took them on opposite paths.

Why did you think it was important that Clementine survived in the end?
Connecting everything so directly to Lee, it makes sense. It feels like Clementine basically expected to die at any moment. Lee, just by being the best person that she knew in the apocalypse, died for her, even for all his good will and his fighting. I think Clementine has been worrying about that since it happened. Given she continues a spiritual journey as mentor figure like Lee did, the idea that she would fall to the same fate would be more of a message of "the cycle continues," and you could do it that way, but that's a hopeless ending. The idea is that Clementine, through her own efforts and how she managed to raise AJ by learning from Lee, lets her surpass the cycle. I think that's a cathartic way to say there is hope, and I honestly think Clementine deserved it.

How come Lee couldn't survive after severing a limb but Clementine could?
That's fair. There are a bunch of canonical examples of limb severing working and getting people to survive zombie bites. We have Abel in the final season and Reggie in season two before Carter pushes him off a roof. Then there are characters in the comics and the show. The amount of time you need to do that is somewhat ambiguous, but you need to do it soon. If you go back and check the amount of time between Lee getting bitten and deciding to sever his arm, you've walked half way across the Savannah, he passed out, and did a bunch of other things. Basically, Clementine chopped it off way sooner, and AJ was able to get her out of that scenario. ◆

The Good



Sony developer Guerrilla Games has not announced a sequel for **HORIZON ZERO DAWN** yet, but voice actor Janina Gavankar (who played Tatai in The Frozen Wilds DLC) says one is on the way. Gavankar told a fan at Star Wars Celebration in Chicago, "Just wait until you see the sequel, you're gonna die."

The Bad

MORTAL KOMBAT 11 introduced fans to a different kind of beating. Players balked at the progression difficulty of the time-limited Towers of Time and randomness of the Krypt rewards (prodding gamers towards spending real-money, of course), forcing developer NetherRealm to make changes. As of the time of this writing, enemy health in the Towers has been lowered and a stimulus package of coins, souls, and time crystals sent out. While the change is welcome, that the game's design necessitated it in the first place – and that NetherRealm didn't sidestep this controversy altogether – is disheartening.

A war of words has broken out between Gearbox founder Randy Pitchford and voice actor Troy Baker over whether Baker would once again voice Tales from the Borderlands protagonist Rhys in **BORDERLANDS 3**. Pitchford says Baker had been offered the role but turned it down. Baker, in turn, has disputed this in a video at OnlySP. Either way, Rhys is being voiced by a new actor in the game. ◆

The Ugly

Quotable

"Yes, we are developing something to look at. Right now, I have no idea where things might fall, but we have to be careful that there is a cadence to Star Wars that doesn't start to feel like too much."

Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy tells MTV News the company is considering doing something with the Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic property. Maybe.

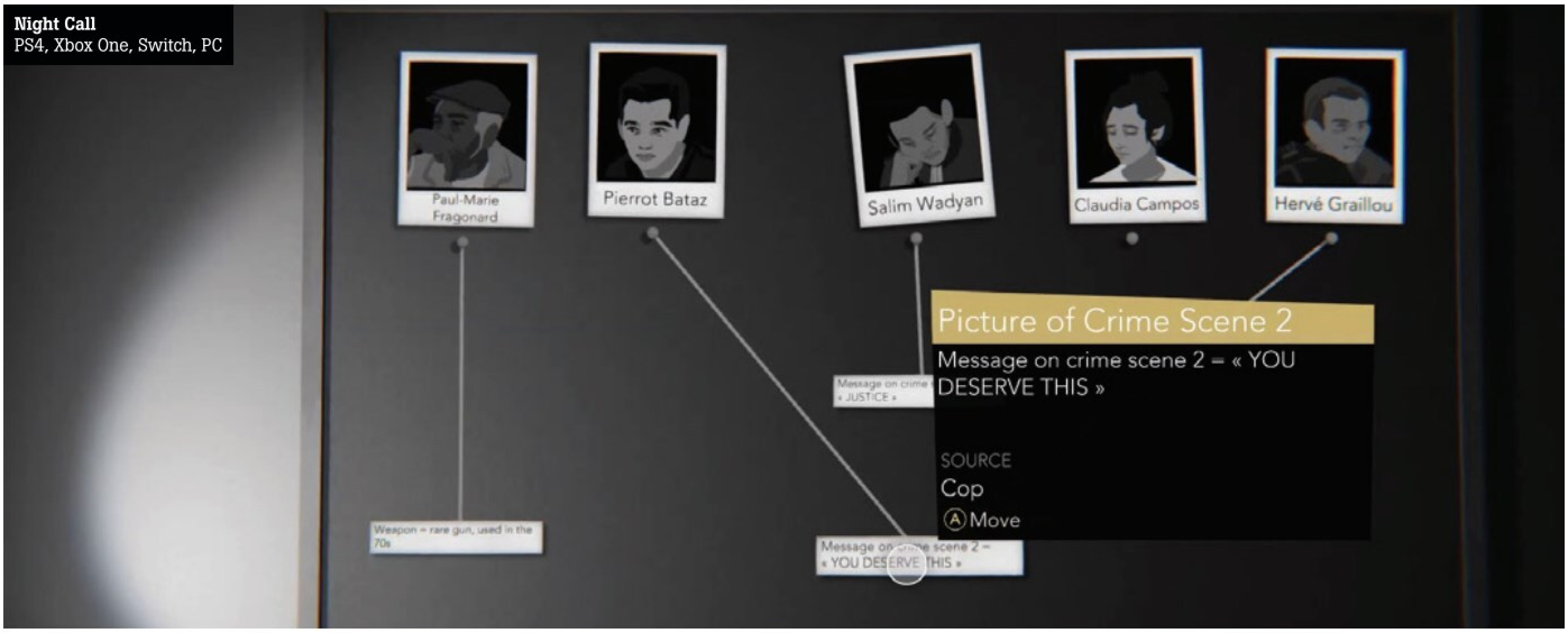
Raw Fury Pummels PAX With A Promising Indie Lineup

PAX East is always a showcase of the most promising indies on the horizon, and this year was no exception. Publisher Raw Fury in particular impressed with three wildly different titles that tap into different genres and styles. *by Daniel Tack*

First up is developer Monkey Moon and Black Muffin's **Night Call**. This procedurally generated noir mystery has you working as a cab driver while attempting to discover the identity of a serial killer claiming the lives of your taxi service's clients. The concept of a story that can go in different directions every time is tantalizing; depending on how your conversations go with passengers, it could end with you finding the killer or becoming a victim yourself. The investigation may take up most of your time, but you still have to earn money as a cabbie to pay your bills, so it's a disparate balancing act between taking fares and putting together the clues as the mystery unfolds. You can start interrogating your passengers for the scoop this summer.

By now, you have probably played one of the many modern farming simulators out there. But what if the farming sim was an action roguelike? Made by a trio of indie game developers, **Atomicrops** puts you in the role of a farmer, but this rural life is anything but slow. When you're not planting or harvesting, you must zip around the farm annihilating deadly mutants that attempt to strip your prized crops from the land. Like many other farm sims, you can in fact build relationships with the town and even marry, but it's all in the context of an uproarious and fast-paced roguelike shooter where keeping your farm functioning means a constant cycle of aggressive gunning, upgrading, and building out your farm's potential. Atomicrops begins the harvest sometime in 2019.

Last but not least is Massive Damage's **Star Renegades**. This tactical turn-based rogue-lite RPG tasks you with building up a team of rebels to take on an evil sci-fi empire. Roaming around an overworld map, you evolve your crew, spawn heirs, and tailor your team for perfect combat against giant bosses and deadly enemies. Allies form bonds and relationships that unlock special attacks and team abilities that can devastate opponents. Over the course of the game, allies could end up being your adversaries thanks to a procedural adversary system. Combat leaves nothing to chance – you know exactly what a move will do when you lock it in, so when you're defeated you know exactly where things went wrong. Counters and interrupts play an important role for sabotaging the plans of your oppressors. Procedurally generated missions, varied equipment, and changing events keep every playthrough fresh. Star Renegades looks to the stars for a 2020 release. ◆

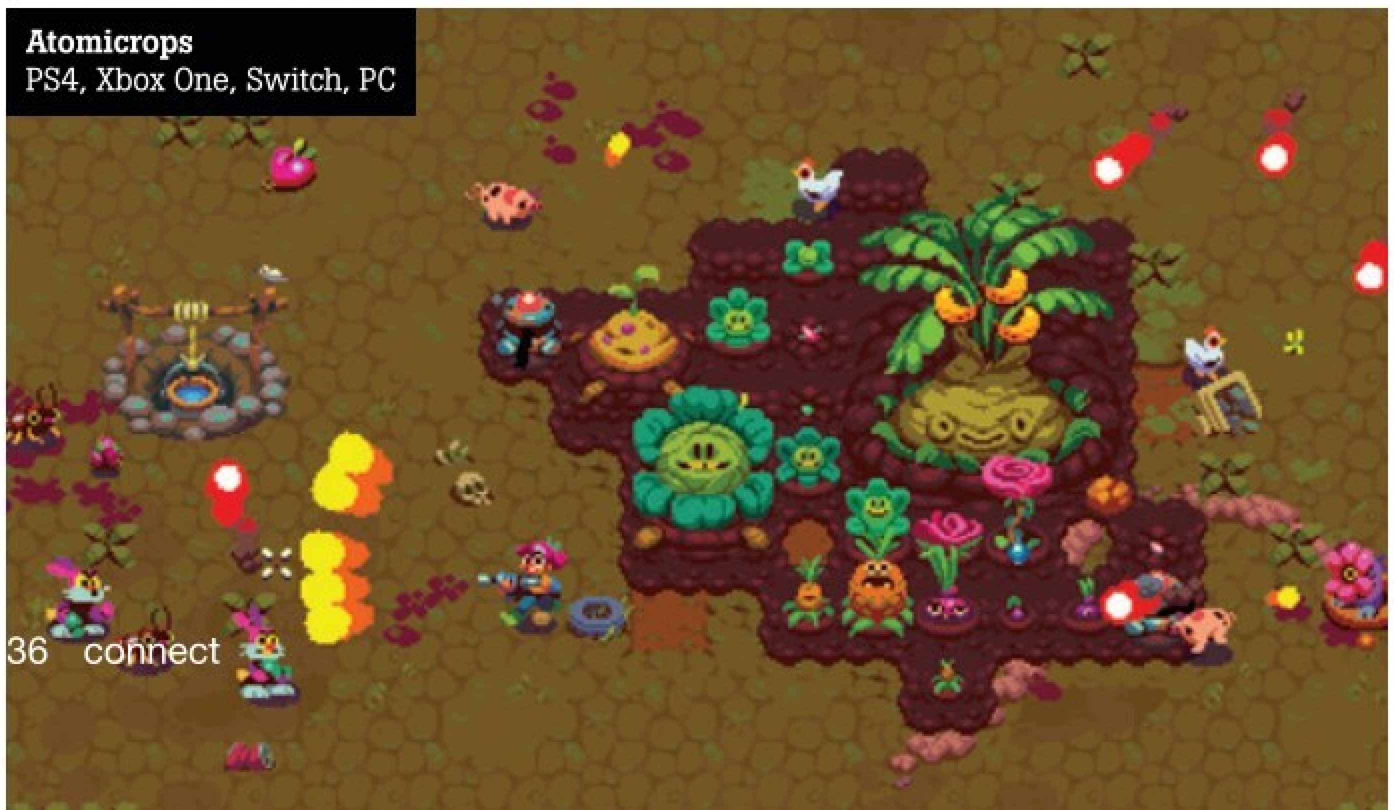

Night Call
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

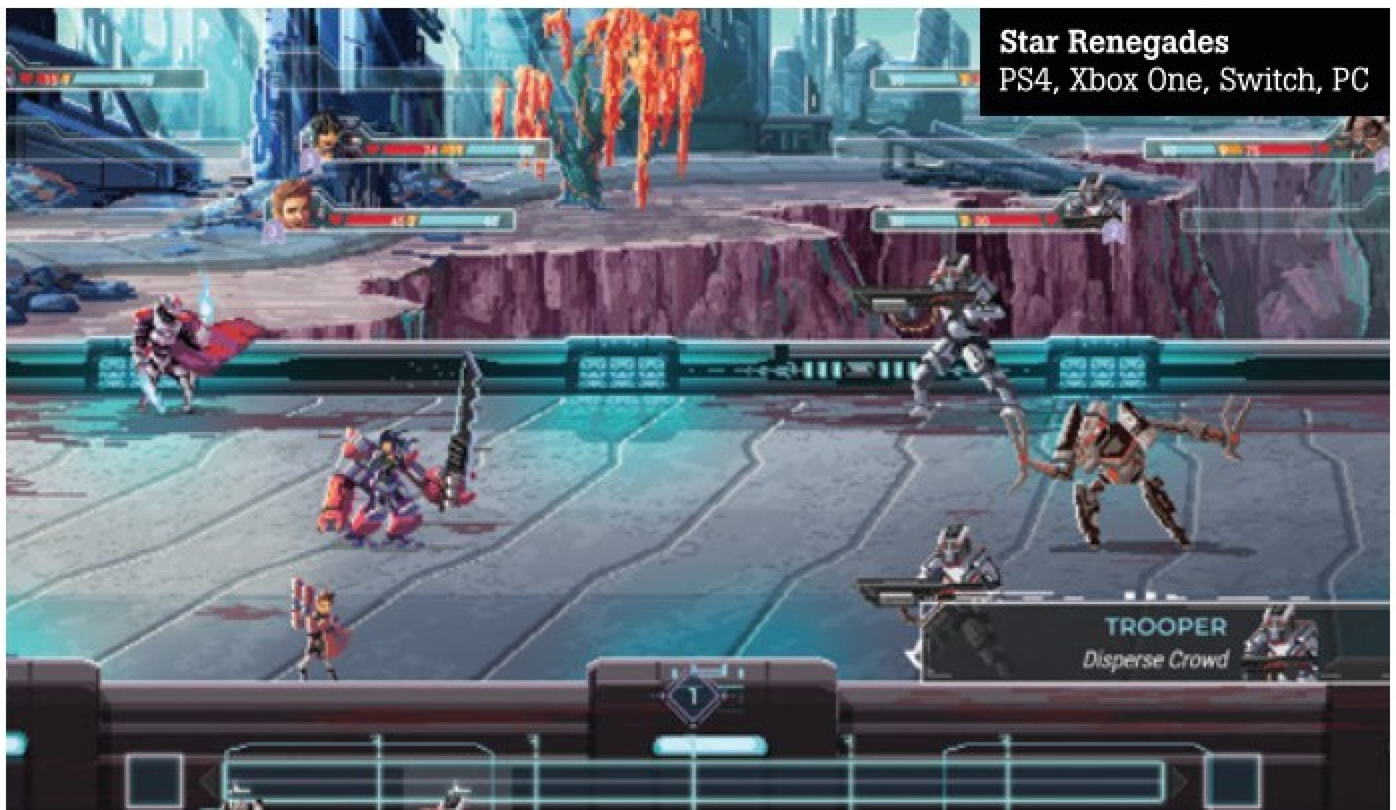
Paul-Marie Fragonard
Pierrot Bataz
Salim Wadyan
Claudia Campos
Hervé Graillou
Message on crime « JUSTICE »
Weapon = rare gun, used in the 70s
Message on crime scene 2 = « YOU DESERVE THIS »

Picture of Crime Scene 2

Message on crime scene 2 = « YOU DESERVE THIS »

SOURCE
Cop


Atomicrops
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC


Star Renegades
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

The Perfect Run

How one streamer completed a marathon of the "Soulsborne" games without getting hit a single time

Name:
J. Ellis
(The Happy Hob)

Occupation:
Streamer

Twitch:
The_Happy_Hob

Twitter:
@The_Happy_Hob

Ever since Dark Souls released back in 2011, masochists the world over have attempted to play through the entire game without getting hit. A handful have achieved that lofty goal, but even among them, J. Ellis (a.k.a. The Happy Hob) is a notable exception. The streamer recently completed a full run of Demon's Souls, the Dark Souls trilogy, and Bloodborne where he didn't get hit a single time. We talked to Ellis about his triumph, the failures that made it possible, and his thoughts on the recently released Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice.

interview by Javy Gwaltney

How did you get into Soulsborne games?
Shortly before the release of Dark Souls II my friends told me about a game called Dark Souls that, unlike all the other games we'd been playing at the time, didn't hold your hand. Beating the game was a big deal at the time. They recounted how hard of a time they had had with it and I was definitely interested. It was Christmas 2013, long before I started on Twitch. I was broke and couldn't afford gifts for friends. Regardless, they decided to buy me Dark Souls.

When did you decide to do a no-hit run?
After I started streaming, "no-death" runs provided a thrill that was previously unmatched for me in just normal playing of games. Within a few months they become boring and I wondered how I could bring back the thrill. I had an idea to push it further to "no hits". We wondered if beating Dark Souls without being touched once was possible. We found out on Valentine's Day 2016 in front of 4,200 people that it was. After that, I upped the stakes with doing all three Dark Souls games back to back. I completed that in March 2018.

Three weeks before I had died and lost a run at the very end of the 'trilogy' to Cinder. The clip went viral. It was soul-destroying to get that far, but just weeks later I was back to the final boss and I beat him. After the trilogy I wanted to add Demon Souls and Bloodborne. Some people in my chat told me it wasn't possible. I knew it was. If I decide I'm going to do something, I know I won't stop. The higher the stakes, the higher the thrill, the excitement, the rush.

What were some of the things you had to master to pull off the run?
The biggest difficulty was not in any individual boss or area of the game but in learning and honing the ability to constantly switch one's focus from being an entertainer and a gamer. Throughout the course of a 10-hour run, a person changes a lot. You can't be laser focused, driven and enthusiastic the whole time. Sometimes I got caught up in the nerves or became apathetic. After countless attempts that end 30 minutes in – or even five or eight hours in – you can see how this is a problem. I had to find ways to center myself all the time, come back to that driven person that had started the run.

What stands out when you do a run with five games is how demoralizing the defeats can be. It didn't hit me as hard in the trilogy, but when you add two more games and you lose a run four or five games deep you question if it's really worth it. That's when community and Twitch plays a big role. There were times when I've quit a stream, thrown controllers, screamed profanities. There were times when it looked hopeless. Throughout the hardship my viewers – "The Followship" as I call them – lifted my spirits, reminding me of past success when everything was going wrong.

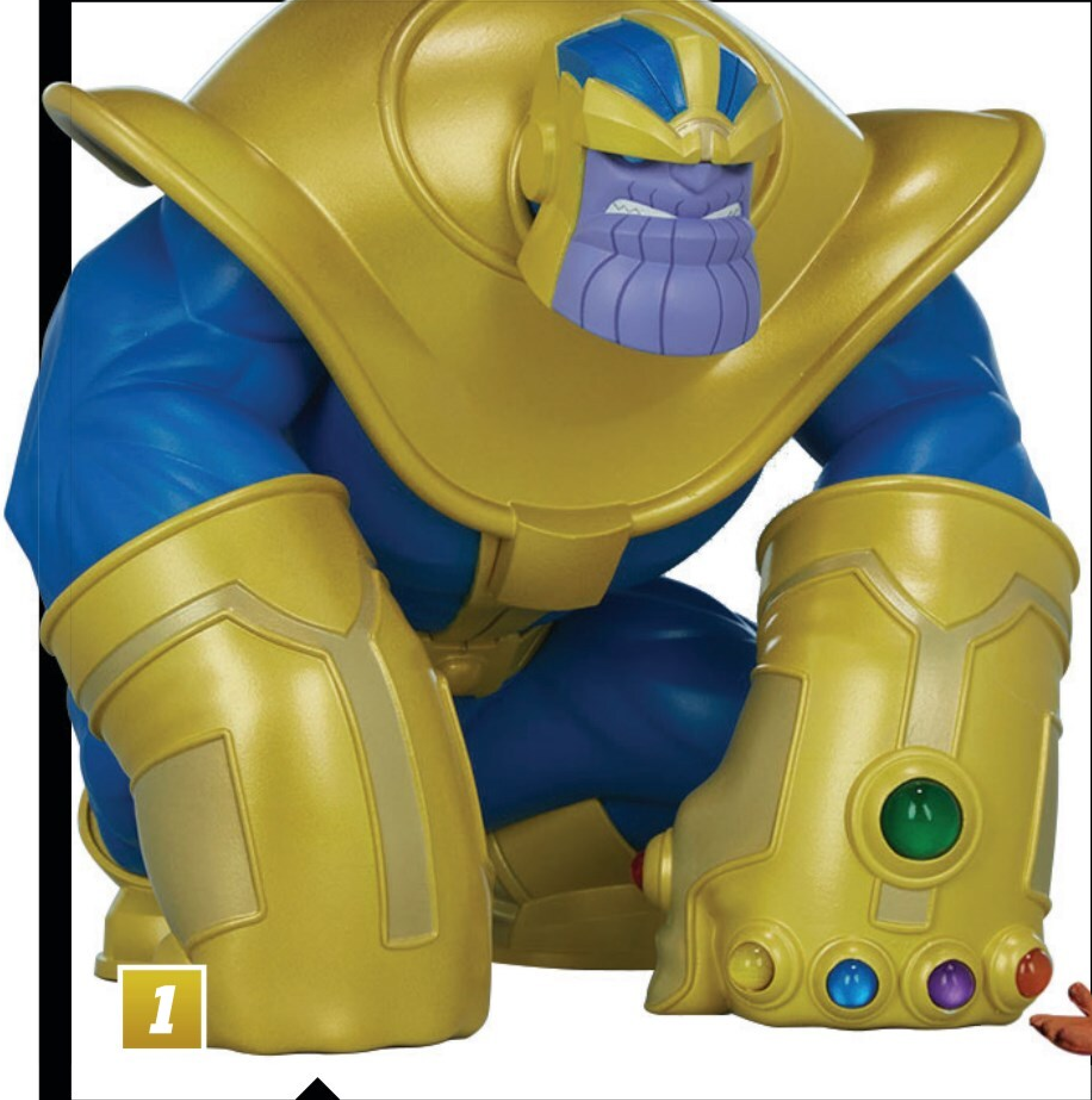
Which From Software title is your favorite?
It's hard to say after so much time playing. At 8,200 hours played, all of them merge into one big game for me at this point. If I had to choose one though I would probably go with Dark Souls III. A perfect way to end the series.

What do you think of Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice so far?
Sekiro is everything I wanted and more, to be honest. It brings almost everything we love about Dark Souls and mixes it up in all the right places. I've struggled a hell of a lot to adapt to this new play style but it is deeply rewarding.

What's next for you, in terms of streaming?
The future for me is to no-hit Sekiro with each of the different endings. After Sekiro there's a world of games for no hit runs: Resident Evil 4, Fallout 3 and Goldeneye are a few I can think of off the top of my head. ◆

MARVELOUS TOYS

by Ben Reeves & Matt Miller



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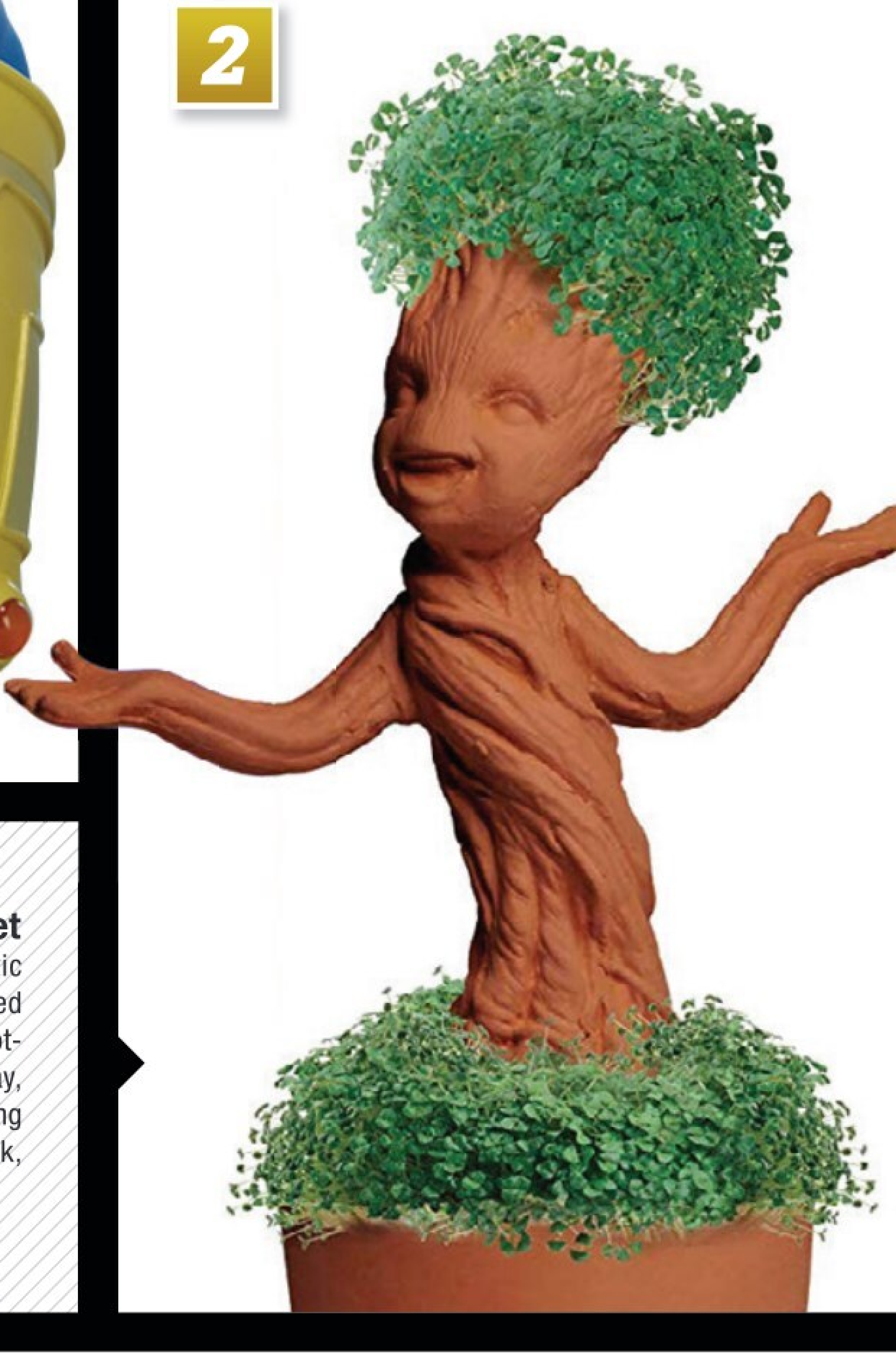


2

1 The Mad Titan Thanos Statue

Thanos has forever reshaped the Marvel cinematic universe and remains a constant looming threat in the pages of our favorite comics. Artist Joe DellaGatta has reimagined the Mad Titan as a brooding, ape-like figure who can happily loom over our desk as long as he likes.

$150 | sideshow.com

2 Guardians Of The Galaxy Groot Chia Pet

Grow your own intergalactic sentient tree with this Marvel-themed Chia Pet. The package includes a Groot-shaped handmade planter, a drip tray, and everything else you need to bring this fan favorite to life. He doesn't talk, but you know what he'd say.

$19.99 | chia.com

3 Marvel Black Panther Mini Backpack

This stylish mini backpack isn't made of vibranium, but you can store all your precious metals and other rare goods in its faux leather casing. The bag measures 8-inches by 4-inches and features an officially licensed Black Panther metallic applique.

$70.00 | loungefly.com

MARVEL
BLACK PANTHER

MARVEL
CAPTAIN MARVEL
SECRET SKRULLS
A HIDDEN IDENTITY GAME

5 Marvel: Strike Teams

Packed with over a dozen pre-painted miniatures, this scenario-driven battle game pits a single mastermind villain player against up to four players, each controlling heroes like Captain America and Iron Man. Skirmish against your opponent and accomplish missions like destroying the superweapon for some extra comic-infused storytelling.

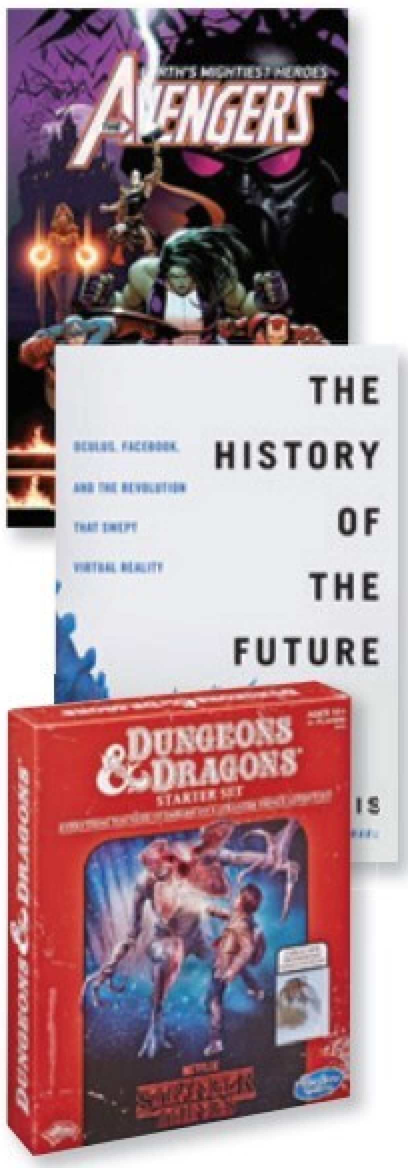
$59.99 | wizkids.com

4 Captain Marvel: Secret Skrulls

This hidden-role card game has players take on the role of familiar characters from the recent hit movie. The fast-moving combat encourages you to take out opponents with everything from alien weapons to intergalactic cats, all while trying to deduce who is actually a Skrull in disguise. Is Nick Fury really a green-skinned alien? Only time will tell.

$24.95 | theop.games

MARVEL
STRIKE TEAMS
A HEROCLIX STRATEGY GAME


AVENGERS
THE HISTORY OF THE FUTURE
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS STARTER SET
STRANGER THINGS

AVENGERS VOL. 3: WAR OF THE VAMPIRES

Jason Aaron and David Marquez's run on Avengers has felt like one giant summer blockbuster after the next. This year, a vampire civil war throws the world into chaos, and the Earth's Mightiest Heroes are forced to hunt down the one being who might be able to bring about peace: Dracula.

$17.99
marvel.com/comics

HISTORY OF THE FUTURE BY BLAKE J. HARRIS

Blake J. Harris, the author of *Console Wars*, returns to tell another tale of transforming industries. After three years of research and a behind-the-scenes tour into Facebook and Oculus comes this real-life story of the breakthroughs and breakdowns in modern virtual reality.

$28.99
harpercollins.com

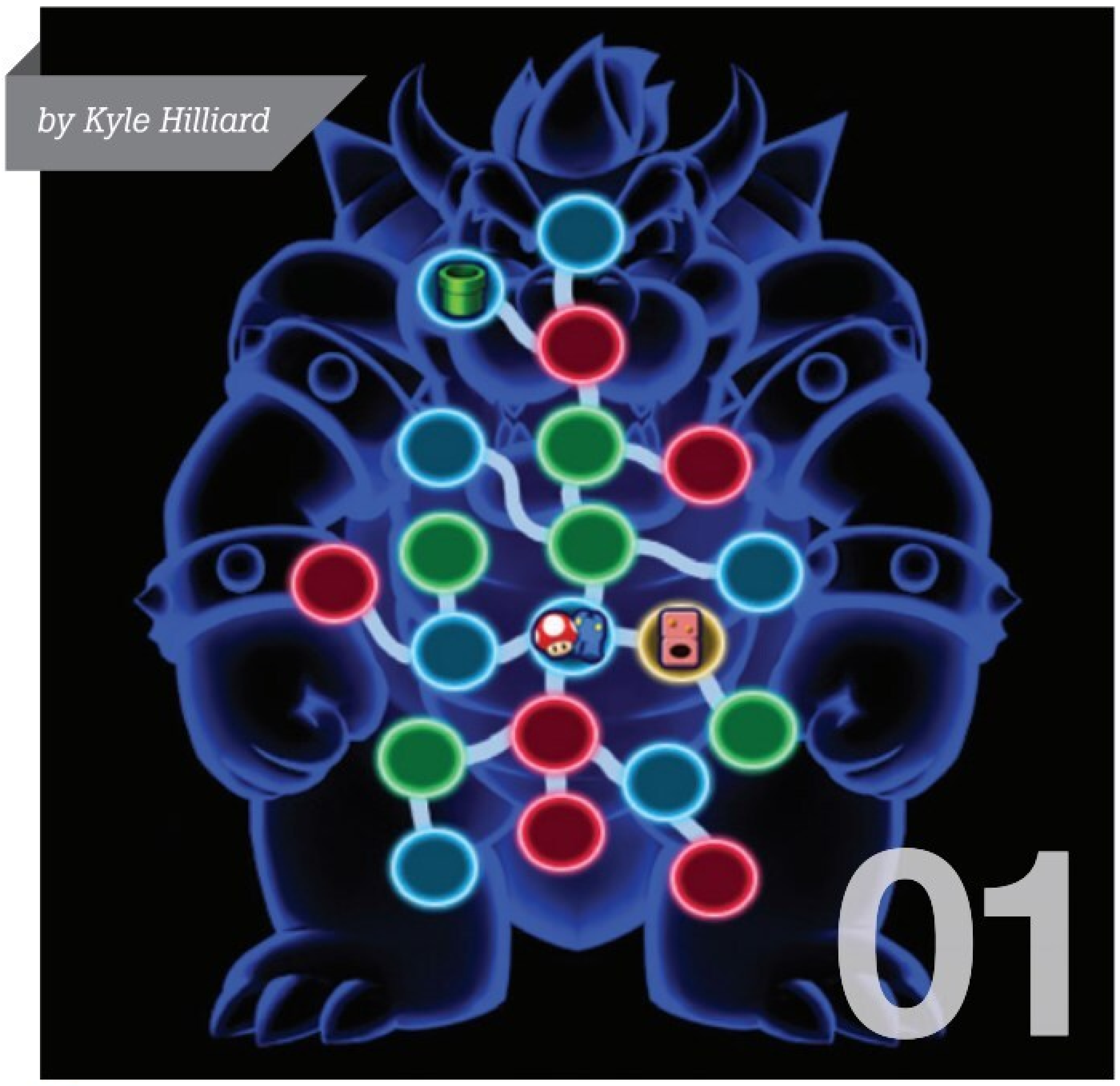
STRANGER THINGS DUNGEONS & DRAGONS STARTER SET

This package contains everything that you and a few friends need to start on your own epic adventure into one of the most beloved pen-and-paper RPGs of all time. The modified ruleset also includes a prebuilt quest based on the game played by the characters in Netflix's hit show *Stranger Things*.

$24.99
dnd.wizards.com

INSIDE MONSTERS

by Kyle Hilliard



Bowser

Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story

Hanging out inside a monster for a level or boss fight has become a gaming trope, but no other game has taken it to the extreme like Bowser's Inside Story. You spend a huge chunk of the game inside your worst enemy and manipulate his innards so you can all make progress together.

Jabu-Jabu

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

Jabu-Jabu's insides are an impressive labyrinth of well-designed puzzles and monstrous bosses, which is pretty weird. But it gets weirder when you consider that when he's not under the influence of an evil force, Jabu-Jabu's belly is apparently a fun playground.

Nexus

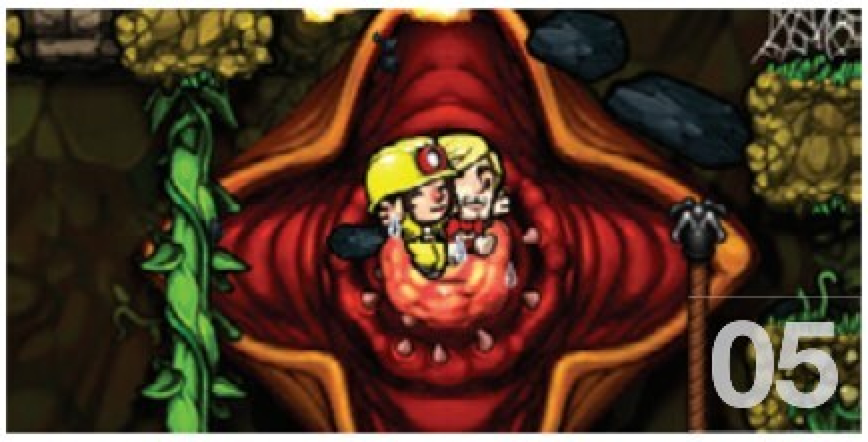
Dead Space 3

Dead Space 3 is not the most loved series entry, but it does have one of the most realistic inside monster bosses. You slide through the Nexus' intestines, take a pitstop in its stomach to shoot some weak points, and get kicked out the other side. It's gross and scary, but awesome.

Jörmungandr

God of War (2018)

The World Serpent is a surprisingly friendly beast in God of War, and is even capable of speaking, which makes it surprising when he invites you inside his mouth to retrieve Mimir's missing eye. Turns out Jörmungandr has a sweet tooth for giant wooden ships.



Giant Worm

Spelunky

Spelunky is a game full of odd secrets, but one of its strangest involves landing on a sticky pad while holding a damsel in order to call forward a worm who eats you, taking you to a secret vertical level with unique enemies and weapons. If you beat it, you get to play as Meat Boy.

The Riftworm

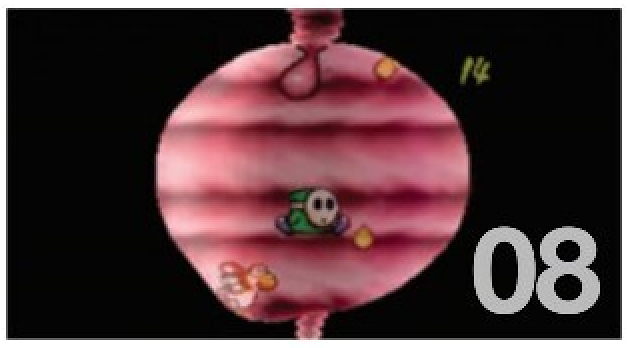
Gears of War 2

In Gears of War 2, the Locust are using a giant creature called the Riftworm to dig below humanity's remaining stronghold city, Jacinto. Marcus and the boys are generally opposed to the city's destruction, so they enter the monster to destroy it from the inside.

Sin

Final Fantasy X

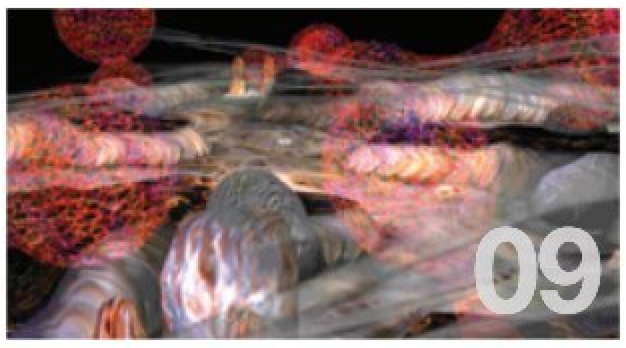
Without spoiling too much about Sin, the game's big bad is so big the entire final dungeon and confrontation takes place inside its body. Sin eats you and your party as you fight in the sky from the bow of your airship.



Prince Froggy

Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island

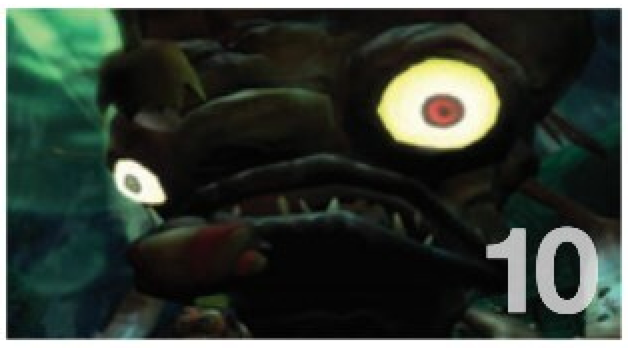
Every boss in Yoshi's Island is a memorable, enlarged version of the enemies you fought leading up to it, but Prince Froggy is different. Instead of becoming huge, Magikoopa shrinks you and you get eaten. After that, you have to throw eggs at its uvula until it spits you back up.



Cathedral Ship

Xenosaga Episode 1

Don't be fooled by the word "ship." The Cathedral Ship is a living thing with gross insides you have the privilege of walking around inside of and fighting. It eats you and your crew, including your handy android KOS-MOS, who seems nonplussed about the whole thing.

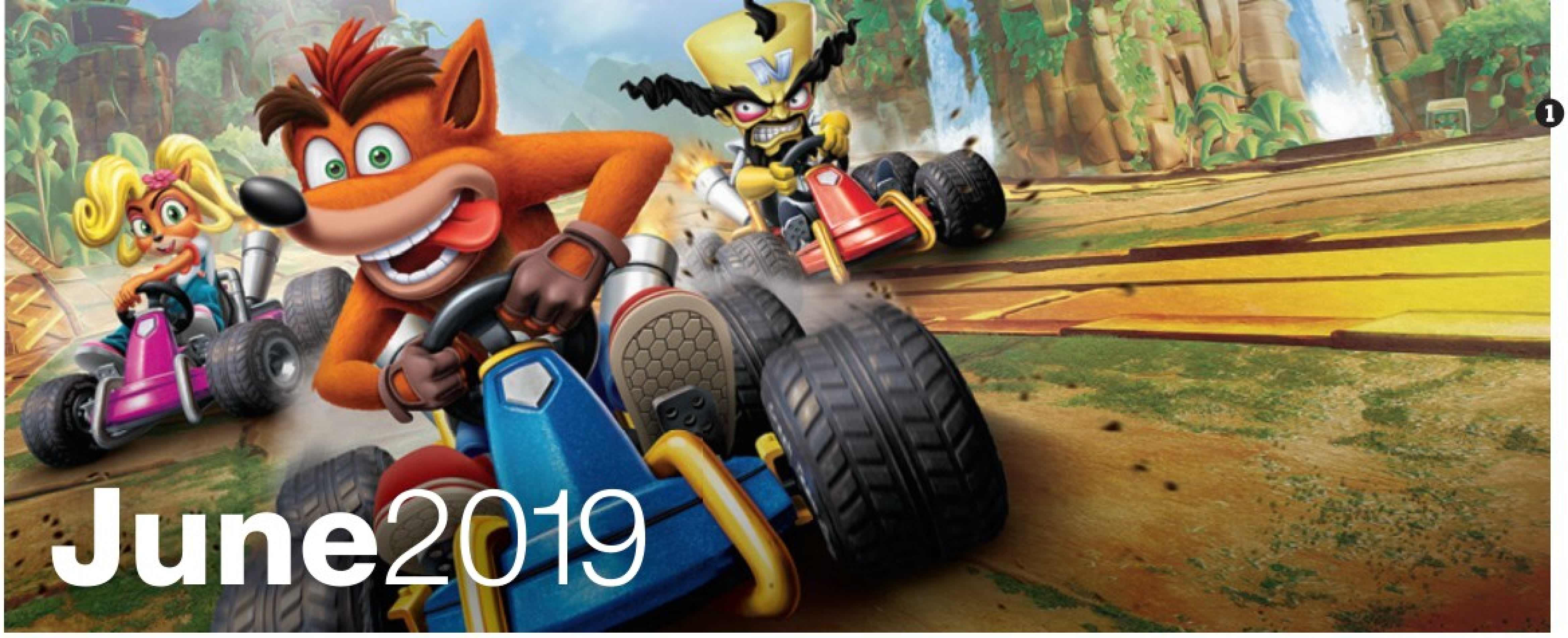


Linda

Psychonauts

Outside of fast-travel, you don't go inside of Linda, the giant sea monster that guards Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp's lake. Instead, you go inside of Linda's mind, revealing a strange Kaiju-inspired subconscious that you must help repair.

June2019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GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 04
- The Elder Scrolls Online: Elsweyr (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth (3DS)
- Warhammer: Choasbane (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 21
- Crash Team Racing Nitro-Fueled (PS4, Xbox One, Switch) ❶

- Judgment (PS4)

Thursday 27
- Samurai Shodown (PS4, Xbox One)
- The Sinking City (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 28
- F1 2019 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

MIB
INTERNATIONAL
❷

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Sunday 02
- Fear the Walking Dead (AMC)
- NOS4A2 (AMC)

Wednesday 05
- The Handmaid's Tale (Hulu)

Friday 07
- Dark Phoenix (theaters)
- The Secret Life of Pets 2 (theaters)

Friday 14
- Men in Black: International (theaters) ❷
- Shaft (theaters)

Sunday 16
- Instinct (CBS)

Friday 21
- Toy Story 4 (theaters)
- Child's Play (theaters)

Pokémon
GO
FEST
2019
CHICAGO
❸

GAMER CULTURE

Friday 07

EA Play

EA is once again avoiding E3 to do its own thing. This year the company won't be holding a press conference, and instead will focus on livestreams offering deeper dives into its games. From Apex Legends to Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order, fans should expect three full days of reveals and announcements.

Tuesday 11

E3

With Sony out of the picture, this year's E3 will be smaller in size, but we can still expect big reveals from Nintendo, Microsoft, and many third-party publishers. This show could also give us our first look at the next generation of games. Microsoft may reveal the Xbox One successor, and Nintendo could have new Switch hardware on hand.

Thursday 13

Pokémon Go Fest ❸

For the third consecutive year, Niantic is bringing Pokémon Go Fest to Chicago. Held in the sprawling Grant Park, trainers will be on the lookout for Hippopotas and Pachirisu. Other rare critters may also be lurking about over the course of this four-day gathering.

Monday 17

Games For Change

Held in New York City for three days, the Games for Change Festival brings developers, educators, researchers, and more together to discuss how games can be used for good, along with talks and workshops, and an arcade featuring games designed for social impact.

Thursday 27

Salt Lake Gaming Con

This three-day gaming convention held in Salt Lake City's Salt Palace Convention Center features video games, board games, tournaments, a kids zone, and celebrity appearances. You can meet the voices of Apex Legends' Bangalore (Erica Luttrell) and Lifeline (Mela Lee). Salt Lake Gaming Con prides itself on being one of the 10 largest gaming conventions in the country.

» PLATFORM
Switch

» STYLE
1 to 4-Player Action/
Role-Playing (4-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
Nintendo

» DEVELOPER
Koei Tecmo/Team Ninja

» RELEASE
July 19

TRIUMPH THROUGH TEAMWORK

MARVEL ULTIMATE ALLIANCE 3: THE BLACK ORDER brings the long dormant series back through unexpected partnerships

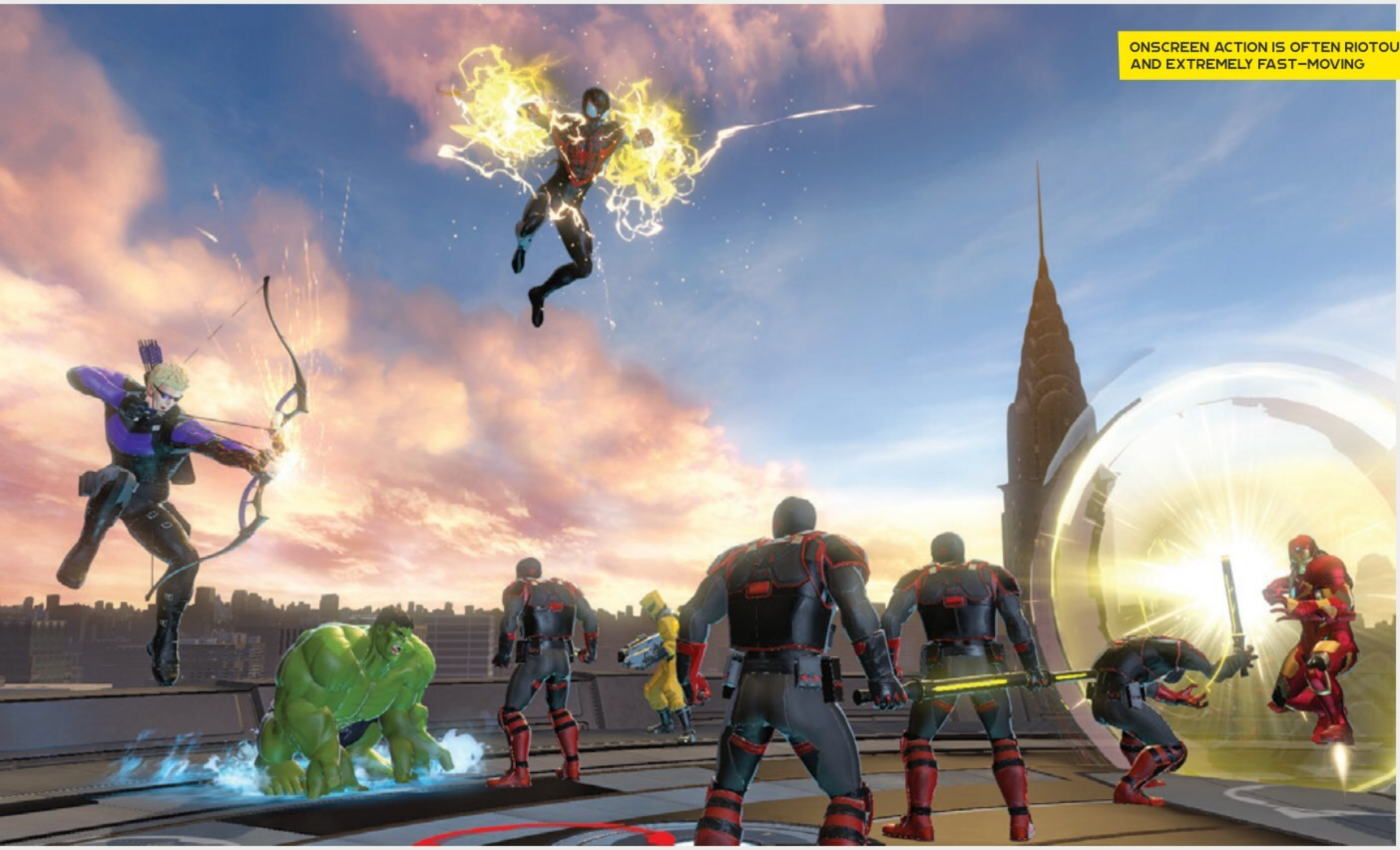
When X-Men Legends released in 2004, it was one of those games that made everyone shake their heads wondering "why hasn't this been done before?" Take the appealing characters and settings of the sprawling Marvel universe, and lay them over the fun of classic isometric action/RPG gameplay. As the series shifted to encompass the wider fiction with Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, more heroes joined the cast, the action became more bombastic, and the series seemed destined to join the ranks of other perennial favorites in the genre. Then, in a snap, it was gone.

BY MATT MILLER

TEN YEARS AFTER THE LAST ENTRY'S RELEASE, MARVEL ULTIMATE ALLIANCE 3 IS THE LONG-AWAITED RETURN OF THE FAN-FAVORITE.

© Marvel 2019

Exclusively built to capitalize on the strengths of the Switch, publisher Nintendo aims to deliver the kind of family-friendly and accessible gameplay players have come to expect in games like Super Smash Bros. and Mario Kart, where ease of entry belies a rich late-game depth for more dedicated core players. The creators of Nioh and Hyrule Warriors over at Team Ninja are tuning their action-focused sensibilities to evolving the familiar gameplay loop, while Marvel Games is lending its full support with writing talent, character selection, and an eye toward authenticity of the fiction. On the heels of one of the most ambitious cinematic movie roll-outs in history, a fresh take on Thanos and the Infinity Stones seems primed for success, but only if this new team-up can capture the old magic.



ONSCREEN ACTION IS OFTEN RIOTOUS AND EXTREMELY FAST-MOVING

ASSEMBLING THE TEAM

Well over a decade ago, fans embraced the simple fun the Ultimate Alliance series was serving up. Longtime comic fans adored the fantasy of dozens of beloved characters fighting together in a single game. But even casual players could recognize the inherent thrill to splashy superpowered throwdowns as they unfolded in an isometric action/RPG. The ease of multiplayer engagement made it an easy pick at get-togethers, with an appeal that even crossed generations of family and friends. Activision published those early games to an enthusiastic audience, but in recent years the rights have been in Marvel's court to reapportion.

"We have a lot of reverence for the franchise," says Marvel Games VP and executive producer Mike Jones. "We knew it was really important to a lot of people. But we also knew that after 10 years of not having another installment, it wasn't going to be enough to just make a sequel. That's expected, and we needed something unexpected. So, for the last few years, we were on the lookout for what that might be. And then one day we found our answer."

Nintendo visited Marvel before the Switch was even publicly revealed to show off early hardware plans and a vision for a system focused on social and shared play experiences. "Once we understood what Nintendo had in store for the next generation of gaming, by the end of the meeting we were on our feet with excitement, going: 'This is it! This is the next step for Ultimate Alliance,'" Jones says.

For its part, Nintendo also saw the potential for cooperation, and recognized the opportunity to pursue a new installment as a Switch exclusive. "There was a mutual feeling that the series itself was one we hadn't seen in a long time, and that we wanted to see it come back," says Nintendo Treehouse's Bill Trinen. "From a multiplayer perspective, it's the ability to just set it up and play it anywhere. From a Marvel content perspective, that feels like the perfect fit for the Switch platform because of the multiplayer focus, and because of the versatility of the platform."

That reinvigorated partnership between Marvel and Nintendo led to the question of development duties. Who could emulate the vibe of earlier games, but bring a fresh and modern vision to the action? "In parallel to all of these conversations, we were also huge fans of Team Ninja and Koei Tecmo and their esteemed history," Jones says. "We had always been looking for a way to work with them on a project together, and Nintendo already had a fantastic relationship there."

Team Ninja is filled with self-professed Marvel enthusiasts, which played a big part in the team's desire to make a presentation for what they could do with the franchise. "We think that Team Ninja is known for our action games, and we really wanted to expand on that aspect of the game," says Team Ninja director Hiroya Usuda. "So we put a lot of focus on the gameplay. We wanted to get good response from the controllers when you're playing, and also have good tempo to the gameplay."

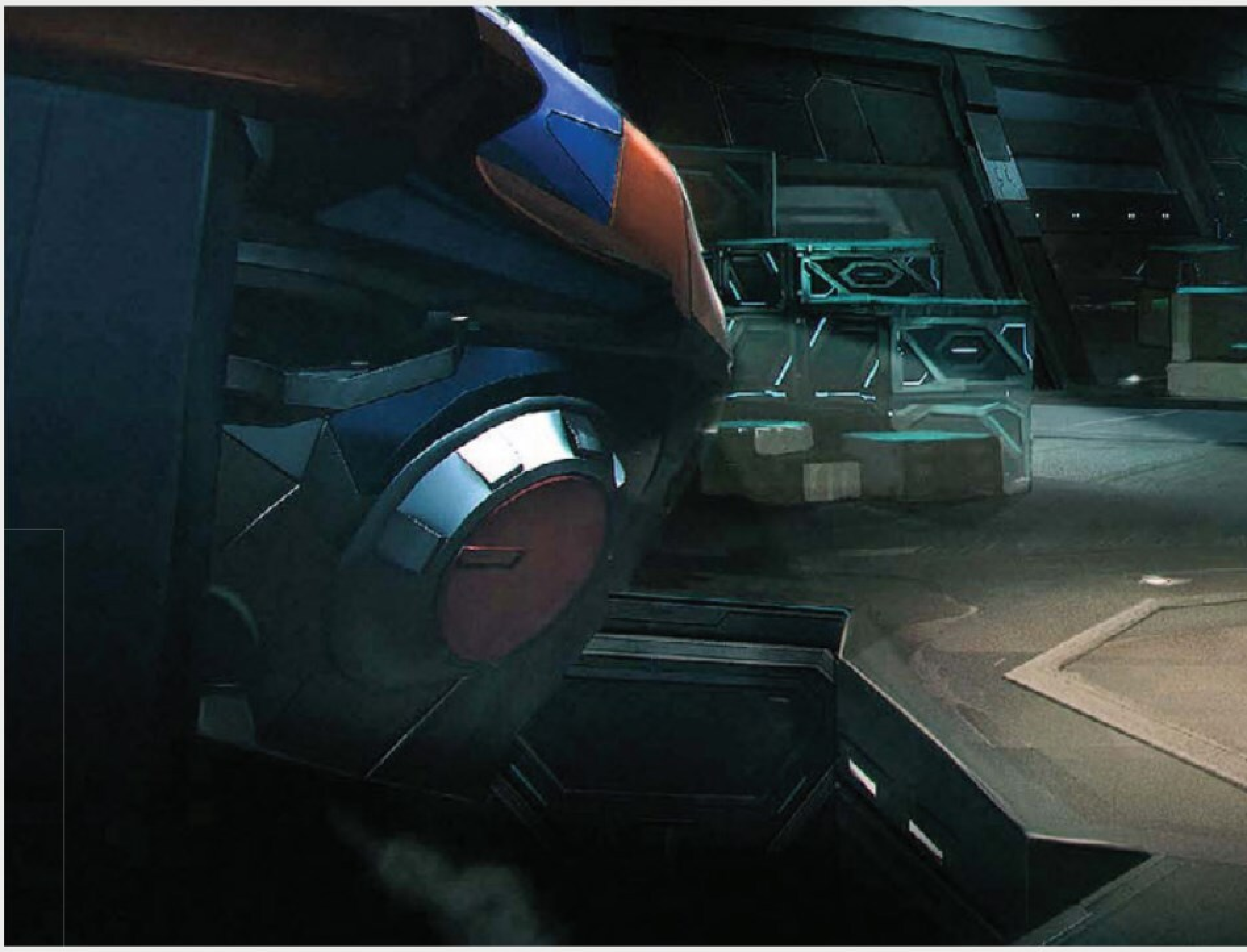
"They are able to deliver that quick response and high fidelity that people want to feel from our heroes," Jones says of Team Ninja's work on the project. "You want Wolverine to feel different from Hulk, and each of them to feel different from all the others."

While the Marvel fans at Team Ninja were eager to craft their vision of the Marvel universe, they also wanted a story that felt authentic to a very particular writing style, one that Marvel has cultivated internally through its comic writers for decades. To achieve the right vibe, one of those writers would need to take the reins of story creation. "We knew we needed a writer with really broad knowledge, and who would bring a true and authentic voice to the characters," says Marvel Games VP and creative director Bill Rosemann.

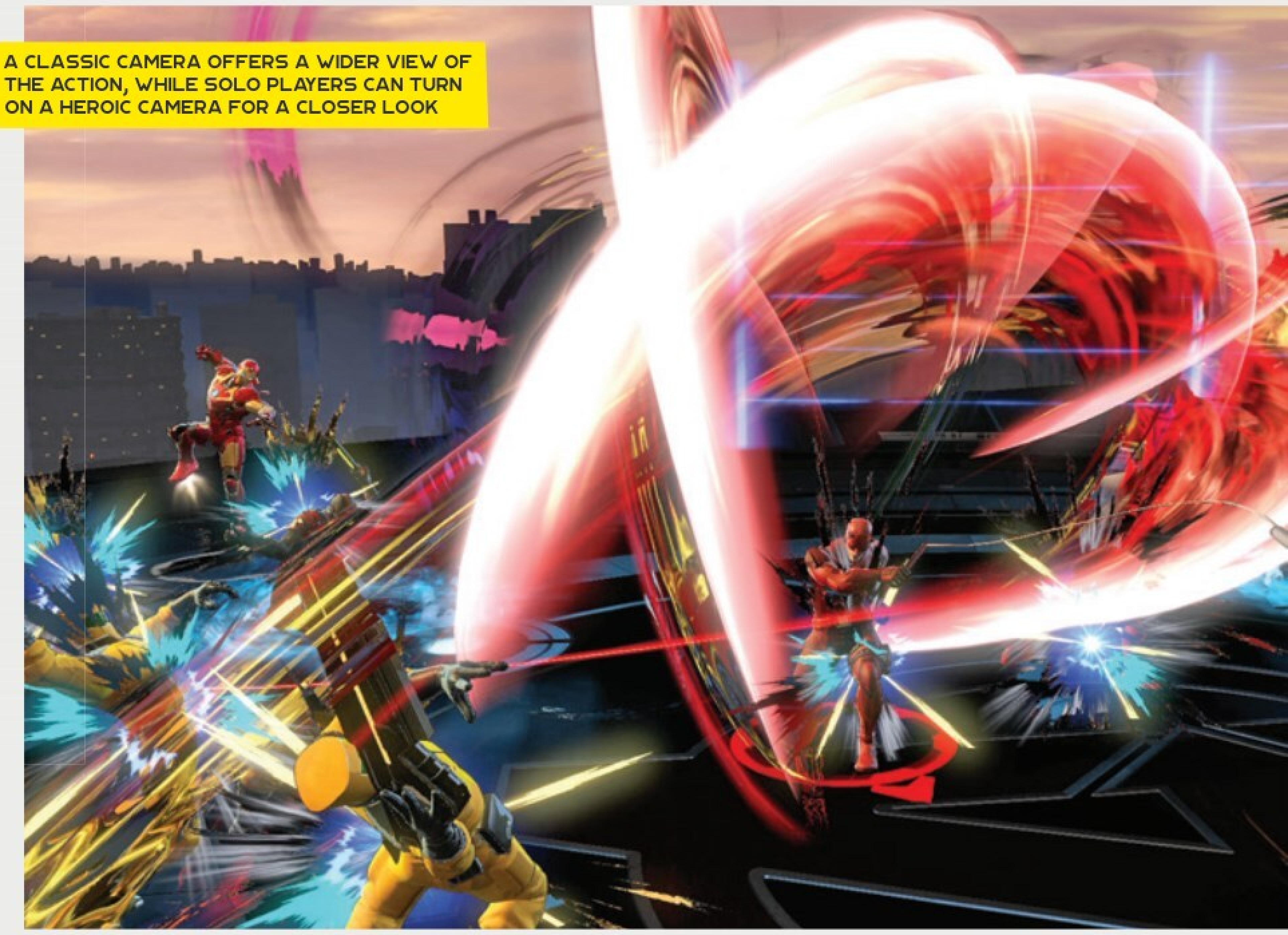
Marc Sumerak came up on the editorial side of Marvel, working on the Avengers family of books. He gained recognition for writing a number of all-ages Marvel titles that required knowledge of a wide variety of the heroes and villains. He also happened to be an avid gamer, and a fan of the earlier games. "He was completely psyched when we first approached him," Rosemann says.

Sumerak crafted a story that rides the line between the comics and the movies, tapping into recognizable conversational patterns for familiar characters, while simultaneously slipping in easter eggs and nods to the comic universe that only dedicated Marvel-ites will recognize. "Our goal was to put together an action-packed adventure that would excite longtime fans, while still remaining accessible to new players unfamiliar with Marvel's rich history," Sumerak says.

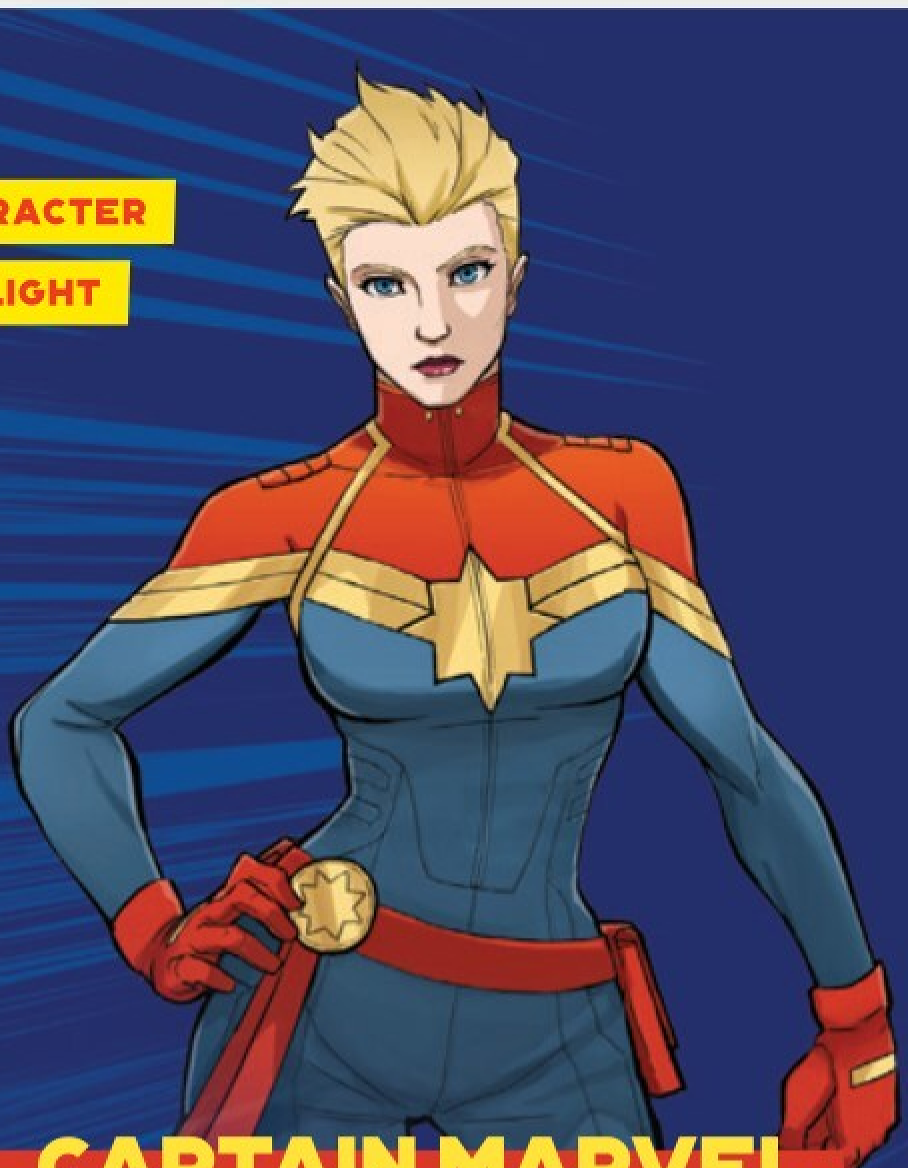
"We were really amazed by the final story produced by Marvel," says Team Ninja producer Yosuke Hayashi. "Anyone who is a fan will be able to appreciate it. It was a storyline that had broad appeal to everybody, and our work was dropping that story into the game."



A CLASSIC CAMERA OFFERS A WIDER VIEW OF THE ACTION, WHILE SOLO PLAYERS CAN TURN ON A HEROIC CAMERA FOR A CLOSER LOOK



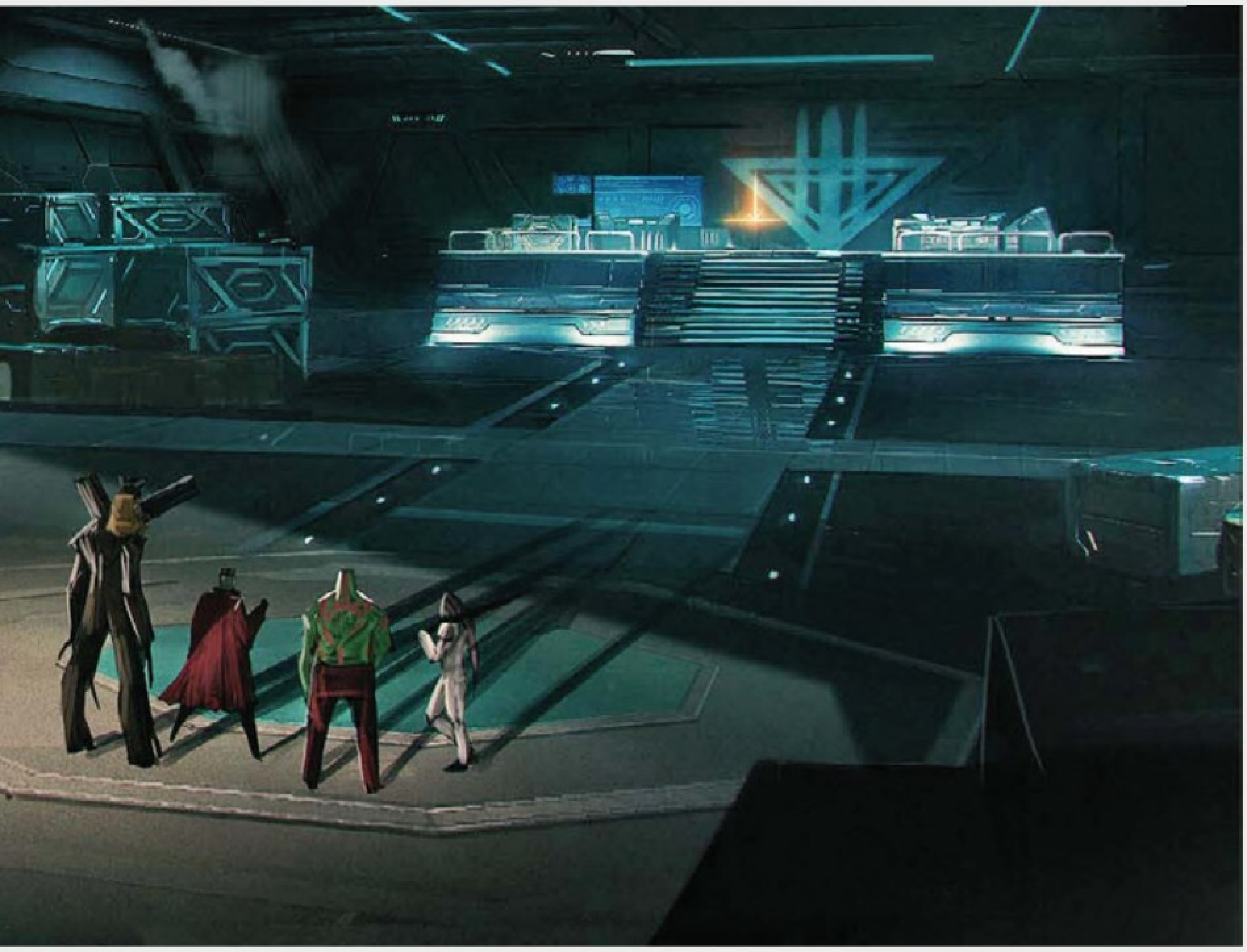
CHARACTER SPOTLIGHT



CAPTAIN MARVEL

Carol Danvers is Earth's mightiest hero, and it shows in her hard-hitting all-rounder play style. She excels at dipping in and out of the action with big single hits, and does a great job of knocking down the stagger gauge on challenging foes. Her Photon Punch rushes the hero forward in an aimed charge, which sets her up perfectly for an AoE Cosmic Burst. Blast Off hits a single target square on with a spinning uppercut, and Cosmic Beam lashes out with a sustained burst of photon energy. She can fly to stay out of ground danger, and after extreme attacks she glows bright, evoking her history as Binary.

COMBINE PARTICULAR HEROES ON ONE TEAM TO GET A TEAM-UP BONUS



CHARACTER SPOTLIGHT

MILES MORALES

One of two heroes in the game who carry the codename of Spider-Man, Miles Morales wields a completely different suite of powers from Peter Parker. He's a mid-range distance battler focused on projectile and paralyzing shock attacks. Web Shooter binds up opponents with multiple sticky blasts. Surprise Strike turns Miles invisible so he can rush in for an electricity zap. High Voltage Lines unleashes a barrage of electrified webs, while Venom Strike hits all nearby enemies with a sphere of shocking energy. In keeping with his arachnid heritage, expect to web sling your way through levels.

HEADLONG INTO DANGER

Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3 opens on the *Milano*, as it blasts the Guardians of the Galaxy away from another job gone sideways. This is the first appearance of the team in the franchise, and a not-so-subtle reminder about how much the Marvel universe has grown and changed in the last decade. Rocket's sensors pick up some powerful readings from a seemingly derelict Kree warship hiding behind an asteroid, and it's not long before the team trips heedlessly into adventure aboard the ship, coming to blows with characters like Nebula, Ronan the Accuser, and the Black Order's Proxima Midnight. The Infinity Stones have been gathered aboard the ship, and the battles that ensue send them scattering across the universe, laying the groundwork for a narrative that could go just about anywhere in the wide-ranging fiction.

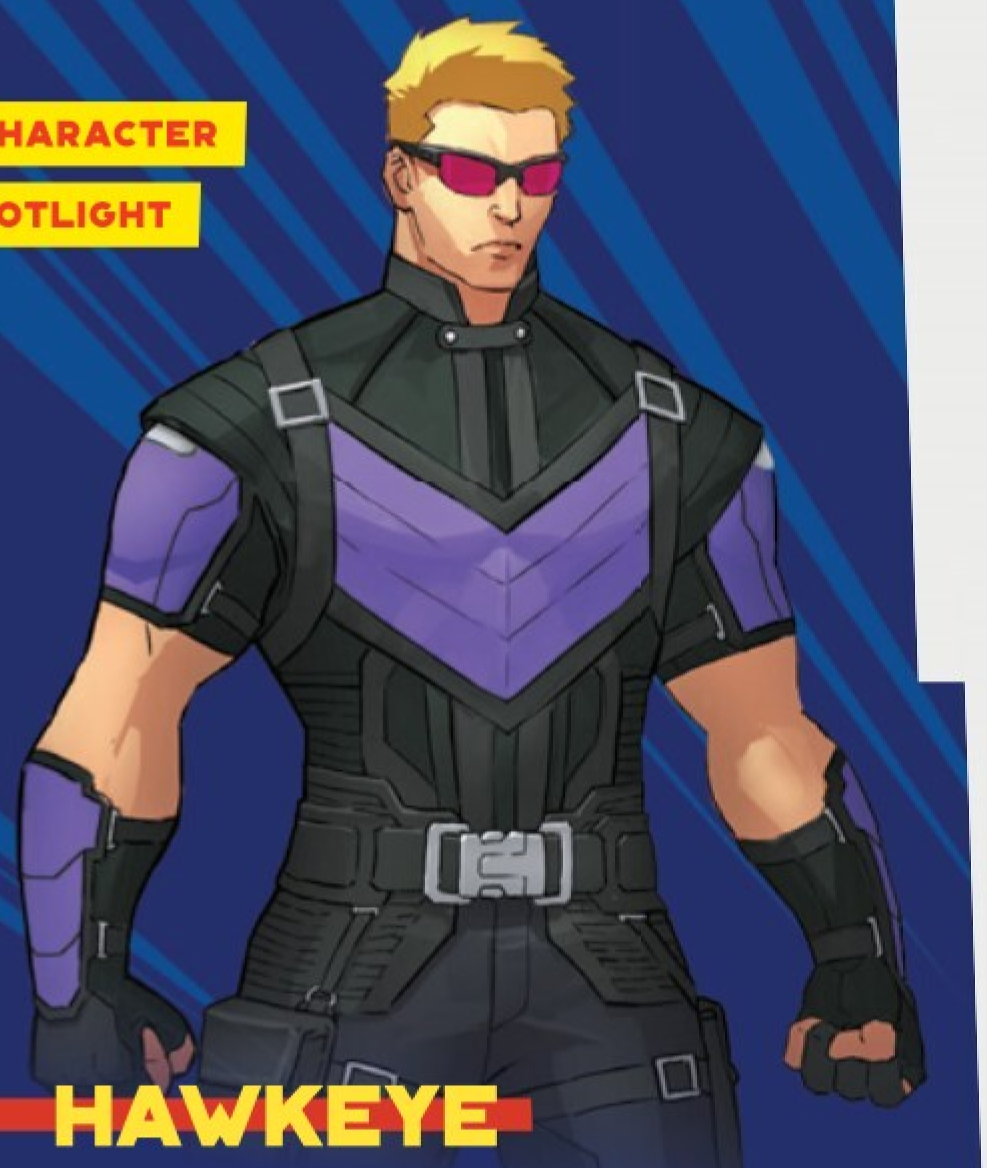
This early chapter shows off the pace and tone Team Ninja brings to the experience. This new installment flits from scene to scene with reckless speed, flinging out character introductions at a pace that's almost hard to track, each offering a pop-up word graphic of the character's name and a witty description of who they are. Tutorial sections are brief and incorporated into unfolding fights. The game wastes little time getting players into the action, battling dozens of Kree soldiers in sudden, frenetic combats. By the time players hit the next chapter on faraway Earth during a prison break at the superpowered Raft, there's already a wealth of characters to pick between, from Captain America and Thor to Wolverine and Storm. "There are a lot of heroes that show up," Usuda says. "We thought it was really important to make sure that the various characteristics and the personalities of the heroes come through in the gameplay."

Players can select characters at one of the familiar blue glowing S.H.I.E.L.D. points fans will recall from earlier games, and any combination of heroes is welcome. Roll out with Black Widow, Spider-Gwen, and Scarlet Witch to snag an attribute team bonus for a "Women of Marvel" team-up. Maybe Spider-Gwen and Miles Morales make a date of it, and garner the "Web Warriors" bonus. Multiple attribute bonuses can be running at once, so there's a meta-optimization to nailing the perfect four-person combo. We saw well over a dozen distinct team-ups during our hands-on play, including "Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.," "Wisecracking Warriors," "Femmes Fatales," "Defenders," and "Midnight Sons," among others.

Each character brings a general style of attack and specialty, and with subsequent leveling, four distinct abilities to harness against the bad guys. Scarlet Witch can buff her teammates with a radius healing effect. Daredevil can employ his radar sense to identify weaknesses, then blitz into targeted foes with his billy club. Rocket & Groot (playable as a single character working in tandem) can slap away nearby foes with a whip of vines before blasting them with the Quantum Igniter.

The over two-dozen-strong roster of playable heroes each bring their own vibe to the fight, and each improves independently as you play with them. While that dynamic is certainly in place to encourage dedicated replay, the game also offers an item drop called XP Cubes that allow for rapid improvement, and the inclusion of a lower-level character alongside some higher-powered buddies can rocket them into viability. Four characters are always onscreen at a time, so even smaller solo or duo player counts can expect to level a bunch of characters during one playthrough.

CHARACTER SPOTLIGHT



HAWKEYE

The rebel marksman of the Avengers, Clint Barton is a balanced and flexible ranged expert, and his powers provide extensive utility to confront a variety of weaknesses. Piercing Shot fires off powerful arrows in his facing direction, while Scattershot shoots multiple detonating arrows even as Clint backflips out of danger. Exploding Arrows sees a barrage of arrows rain down in a wide array to inflict fire damage. Shock Value pours out a devastating assault of electric shafts.

DURING OUR HANDS-ON TIME, SOME OF THE MOST FUN WAS FOUND IN JUST EXPERIMENTING WITH EACH CHARACTER'S POWERSET

GOING TO BATTLE

Even ahead of complete ability set unlocks, the onscreen action is chaotic and explosive as my team and I bash our way across the Raft and its superpowered clientele. As Hulk, I thunder clap a clawed prisoner into senselessness. One of my partners rolls in with Black Panther and claws into a heavy. Iron Man's missiles detonate. Doctor Strange's magical effects splash the battlefield with color. Spider-Man swings across the screen in a flash. All the characters block and dodge through the fight as big enemy attacks come rolling in. "We really wanted to give the user an experience where they could customize their characters to get the most out of them," Usuda says. "Of course, there are a lot of characters, so it's really fun to try out different combinations of abilities and stats in order to get the most out of the character."

Depending on solo or group play, Team Ninja implemented two options for camera placement, each optimized to provide a different feel. The classic camera is a tweaked variation of the wide-scope isometric view players will recall from earlier series entries, while solo players can optionally choose a "heroic" camera for an up-close focus on the fight. "You get a more dynamic view of the character you're playing with, and it really puts you in the action," Usuda says. "Bosses will look bigger, and you'll really get a sense of the heroic movement that you might be used to from seeing Marvel content."

In addition to character abilities, Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3 also relies on two distinct team-up dynamics to further accentuate your destructive capabilities. Synergy attacks are unique ability combos between two heroes. Iron Man shoots his unibeam at a powered-up version of Captain America's shield, and the laser splits to nail multiple targets. Storm and Thor work together to create a cyclone that whirls and roars with electricity. These synergies pop up as a button prompt

D55
D56
D57
D58
LEVEL DELTA

SOME ENCOUNTERS DEMAND SIMPLE PUZZLE SOLVING TO PROGRESS

indicator between characters when proximity and ability recharge dictate they are ready to be triggered. “We wanted people who were playing together to have fun combining their various abilities,” Usuda says.

Unlike synergies, extreme attacks are triggered by a pull of the left and right triggers when the relevant EX gauge is powered up. Your character’s portrait flashes on screen, and offers a brief window in which any other character can join in. If playing solo, additional L+R taps add more characters into the mix. These screen-clearing blasts show your characters unleashing devastating energy bursts and swings that hit everything nearby. If all four characters deploy at once, it’s an ultimate extreme, and a satisfying arcade ticker shows the absurd damage numbers climbing into the stratosphere.

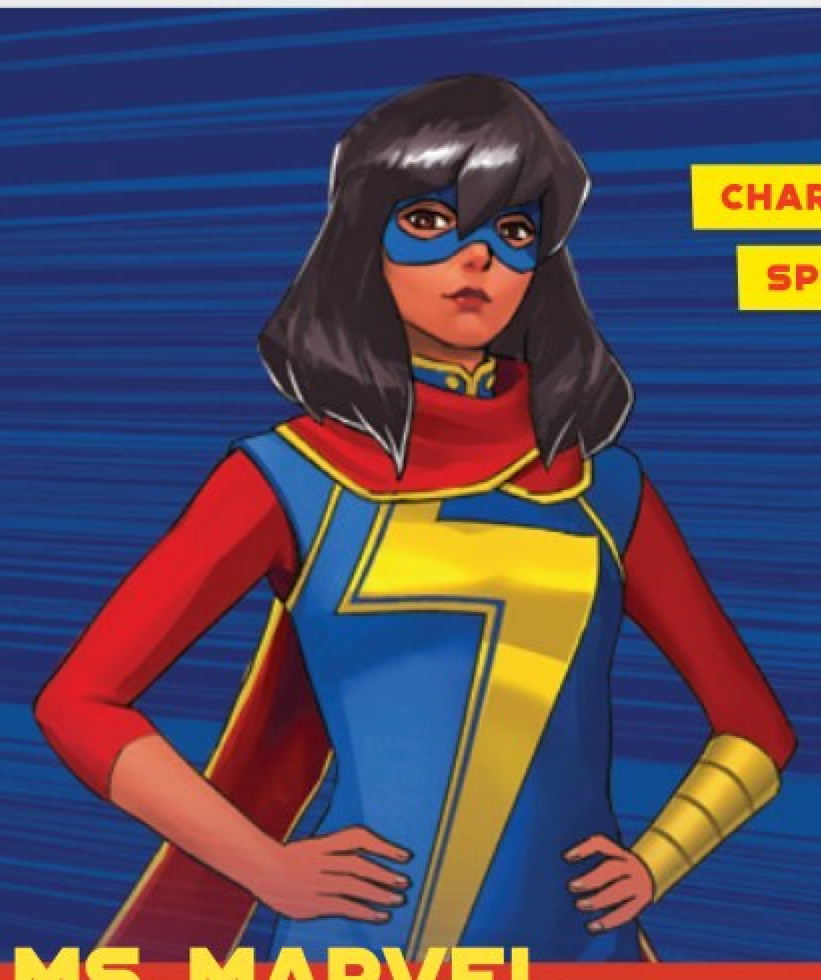
The busy onscreen action doesn’t just come from the heroes. Enemies deal out an array of melee and ranged assaults, and I was impressed by the breadth of attacks on display. Heavies, mini-bosses, and boss characters also tend to exhibit an additional trait that adds a wrinkle to play in the form of a purple stagger gauge. These foes slowly take damage, but sustained attacks temporarily deplete the stagger bar until the foe is eventually stunned. This makes them vulnerable to a barrage of damage dealing. The simple twist adds a lot to the strategic and cooperative elements of play, since any one hero is often ill-equipped to stagger a foe on their own.

Taken together, battles can be simultaneously thrilling and overwhelming. Team Ninja’s talent for aggressive, fast-moving action is on full display, and the battles fill the screen with superpowered mayhem. The pure visual cacophony is simultaneously one of the most exciting parts of play, and perhaps the game’s biggest current challenge to coherent action and strategic play. In a boss battle against Electro and Venom deep within the Raft prison, Venom needs to be lured to sparking hotspots that would trigger the area’s sonic alarm, opening him up to attack. This simple strategic challenge is engaging, but at times I struggled to identify my location onscreen amid the frantic battle.

“We didn’t want everything on the screen to look too noisy or hard for the player to look at, but at the same time we wanted that over-the-top action,” Usuda says. “So, it wasn’t particularly easy to get the effect that we wanted. Our main focus became bringing out the characteristics of individual heroes. With the camera, we wanted to make sure players were able to see what they wanted when the heroes moved to various parts of the screen. It’s a challenge that we’re still working on.”

We won’t know whether that chaos ends up being an exciting trait of the game or a detriment to enjoyment until we experience longer stretches of play and gain familiarity with the visual language of play.

CHARACTER SPOTLIGHT



MS. MARVEL

Kamala Khan has seen her star on the rise in the comics for years now, and her appearance in the new game reveals why she is so well liked. A fangirl at heart, her close to mid-range attacks focus on area of effect damage, thanks to shapeshifting abilities that change the size of various body parts. Embiggen enlarges her fists into massive wrecking balls to crush enemies in front of her. Sweet Combo Attack is a flurry of punches that concludes with a punishing uppercut. Super Face Kick performs a wild lunging kick with an oversized foot. And Giant Foot Spinny Thing does just what you think.

POWERING UP

Team Ninja recognizes the arcade sensibilities that first defined X-Men Legends and the Ultimate Alliance games, and that fast-paced vibe remains intact. But dig just a bit below the surface, and players uncover a deep pool of upgrade options, customization tools, currencies, and further opportunities for long-term investment.

The most fundamental upgrade dynamic is the alliance enhancement system. While characters each advance individually, the alliance enhancement screen is a gigantic web of upgrades that apply to everyone on your team. "It really was about giving the players the opportunity to try out all different kinds of combinations to get the most they can out of these characters," Usuda says. Unlocked through a combination of credits and another currency called enhancement points, individual hexes on this web must be unlocked to allow for other adjacent nodes to become available, reminiscent in some ways of grid-based RPG screens in games like Final Fantasy X. A single node might include a stat increase for might, a boost to the energy that heroes can access for ability usage, or specific defensive or offensive buffs.

Even as your full alliance climbs the power ladder, you can focus on individual favorite heroes to unlock their full potential. Standard leveling will gradually open up all four primary abilities for a character, but each of those abilities can be improved through the expenditure of ability points that have been rewarded over the course of play. By figuring out your favorite heroes and how you like to use them, ability improvement lets you double down on a play style.

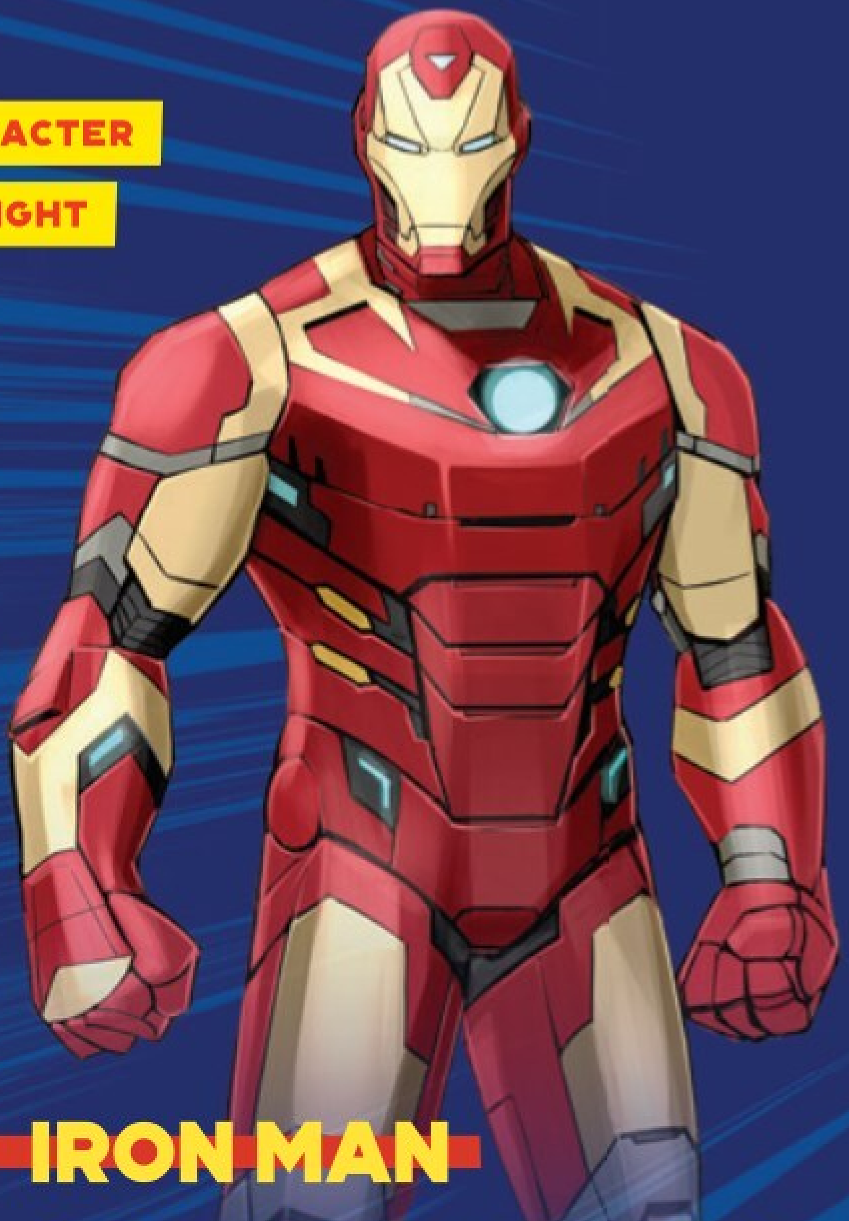
ISO-8 further accentuates that play style flexibility. This equipable isotype is a concept borrowed from other Marvel games, and it lets you dramatically tweak a hero's capabilities in a fight. "From a purely mechanical gameplay standpoint, we're always faced with how we deal with progression and leveling up," Jones says. "How do you allow for some elbow room and creative interpretation of being able to power up characters that have pretty rigid attributes in other stories?" ISO-8 is a solution that encourages flexibility in playstyle from characters who otherwise might feel overly static.

Gained as drops from particularly challenging encounters across the game, certain pieces of ISO-8 might decrease damage taken when your health is low. If you prefer more options for healing, a different ISO-8 might increase the drop chance of HP orbs after enemies are defeated. Add an increased chance for stun, or decrease damage taken by pierce attacks. Contribute a shock attribute to particular abilities or attacks. As your collection of ISO-8 grows, so does its utility, as individual pieces can be dismantled into fragments, which in turn can be used to upgrade other preferred ISO-8 pieces.

These varied leveling mechanics roll out gradually over the course of play, but there's clear intent for end-game depth as the target. The equipable nature of ISO-8 encourages players to think carefully about particular bosses on harder difficulties and how to best target their weaknesses. Ability customization encourages players to embrace particular roles for different heroes, like an upfront bruiser Hulk who can tank damage, or a glass cannon Scarlet Witch with a nearly endless fount of healing energy. Individual heroes already have tendencies built in to their starting setups, but the tools are there for players to make each character their own.

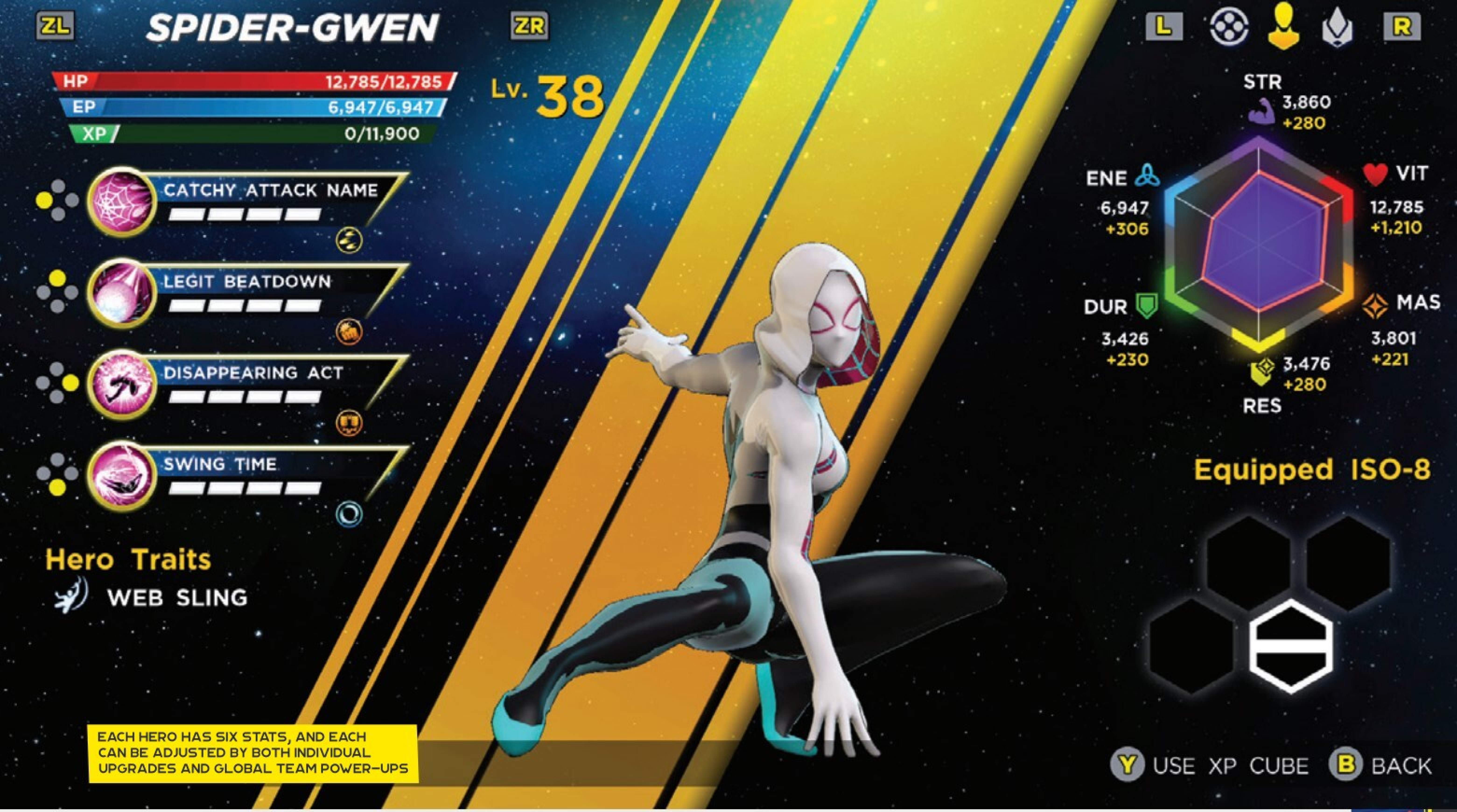
PLAYERS FIGHT VENOM AND ELECTRO TOGETHER IN ONE BIG BATTLE THAT UNFOLDS DEEP INSIDE THE RAFT

CHARACTER SPOTLIGHT



IRON MAN

Tony Stark is one of the most popular superheroes in both the Marvel universe and the real world, and he knows it. His quips using the game's emote system are fun, but he also has a diverse range of attacks. Unibeam smashes into foes with a sustained blast, while the Repulsor Array depicts that iconic red laser spin from the films. Thruster Charge gets Iron Man into the action instantly, while Missile Barrage is easily one of the most satisfying area attacks in the game. Tony can run to keep up with the other heroes, but why would he when he can fly everywhere?



EACH HERO HAS SIX STATS, AND EACH CAN BE ADJUSTED BY BOTH INDIVIDUAL UPGRADES AND GLOBAL TEAM POWER-UPS

INFINITY WARS

While the search for the Infinity Stones across the Marvel universe is the focus of the main story arc, Team Ninja has layered in a system of challenges built to extend engagement across a much longer curve. Infinity Trials offer new twists or entire variations on battles. Ahead of tackling one, you can see tantalizing rewards on display for completion, or for particular objectives completed during play.

Players encounter Infinity Trials through the main story playthrough first, visualized as rifts that transport the team to a new destination for the brief but often difficult fights. By mid-game, a feature unlocks that allows players to access Infinity Trials from the main menu, but you still advance your characters in XP and new rewards with each new challenge you confront. The individual trials are split into groups entitled with Greek letters like Sigma and Lambda, and within each group there's an interconnected web of challenges to try, with new trials unlocking upon completion of the previous trial in the chain. "We provided these Infinity Trials as a way for players to focus on characters that they really want to build up and make stronger," Usuda says. "You put players in different situations with lots of different rules and they'll fight enemies in certain combinations that they wouldn't see in the storyline. In addition, there are rewards that you will only be able to acquire in these trials."

Individual Infinity Trials fall into one of a number of different categories. For instance, wave battles demand you defeat a certain number of enemies. The one we played required 200 Hydra agents to be conquered. Countdown trials set your team against a harrowing onslaught as a timer ticks away; take out enemies to extend the timer. My personal favorite are the ability trials, in which standard attacks do far less damage, but abilities and synergies do much more and recharge faster.

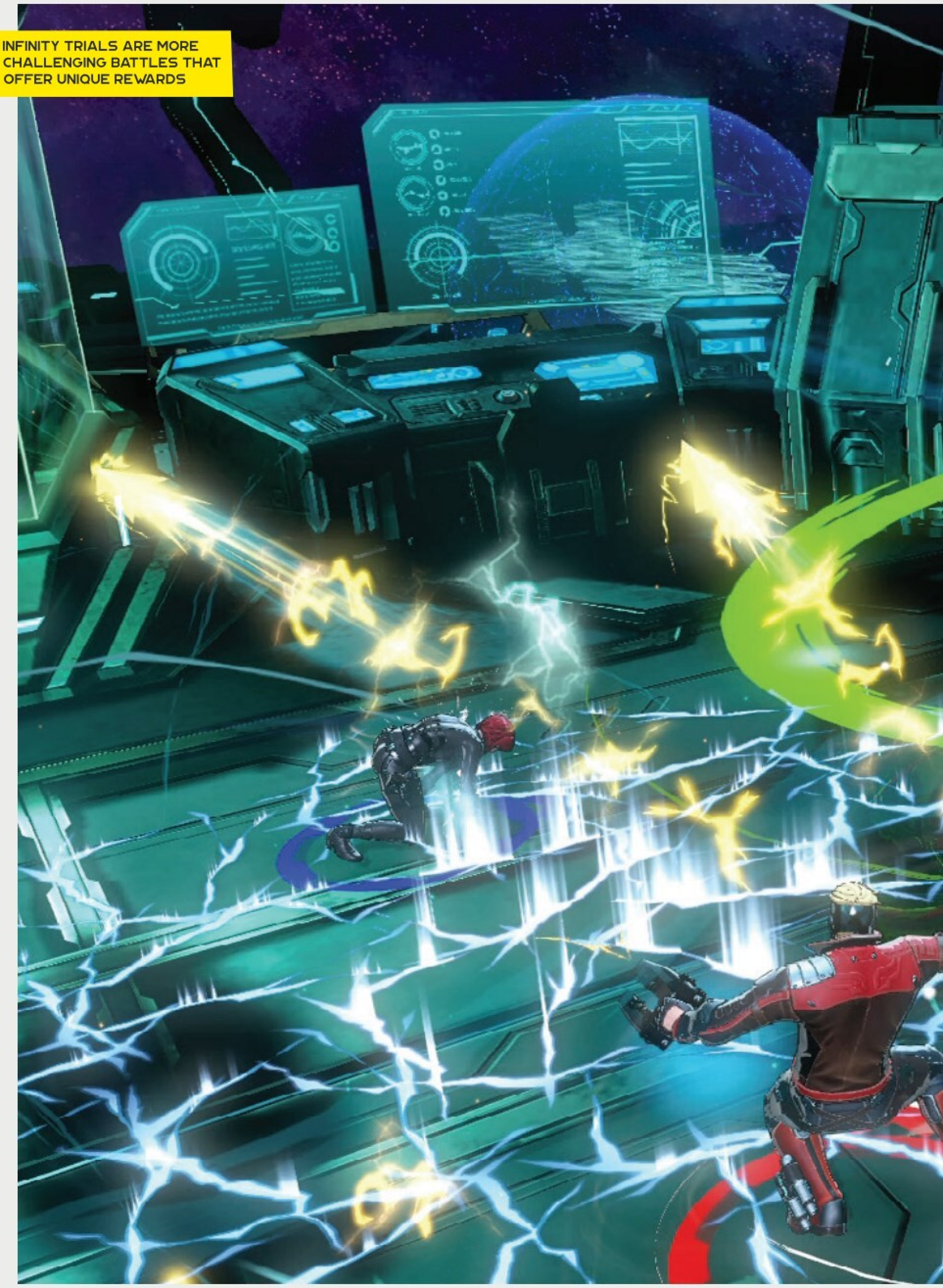
When Infinity Trials are combined with runs at various campaign level playthroughs, the goal is to provide players a continuous flow of leveling opportunities, currency of various types, and appealing rewards like new characters and hero outfits. Casual players can hop in on the "friendly" difficulty setting for a campaign playthrough and button mash to their heart's content with a few favorite characters. Meanwhile, dedicated players can take on the "mighty" difficulty, complete the story, and move seamlessly on to even greater challenges. "After you clear the story once, we provide a new difficulty level for the player," Usuda says. "They'll be able to go through the story again and challenge themselves at this new difficulty level, and get better rewards. You can carry over the alliance enhancements and character levels when you are playing the second time through. We also make it possible for players to select the chapters they enjoy playing the most in the chapter select area as well."

BOSSES HAVE A STAGGER GAUGE THAT CAN BE DEPLETED TO GO FOR BIG DAMAGE MOMENTS

A GROWING ROSTER

While we went in-depth playing with a number of characters, it was just a smattering of the full line-up. Here are all the officially announced playable characters, as of this writing, but we know there are still more to discover.

- Black Panther
- Black Widow
- Captain America
- Captain Marvel
- Crystal
- Daredevil
- Deadpool
- Doctor Strange
- Drax
- Falcon
- Gamora
- Hawkeye
- Hulk
- Iron Man
- Miles Morales
- Ms. Marvel
- Nightcrawler
- Rocket & Groot
- Scarlet Witch
- Spider-Gwen
- Spider-Man
- Star-Lord
- Storm
- Thor
- Venom
- Wasp
- Wolverine



INFINITY TRIALS ARE MORE CHALLENGING BATTLES THAT OFFER UNIQUE REWARDS

FINDING THE MAGIC

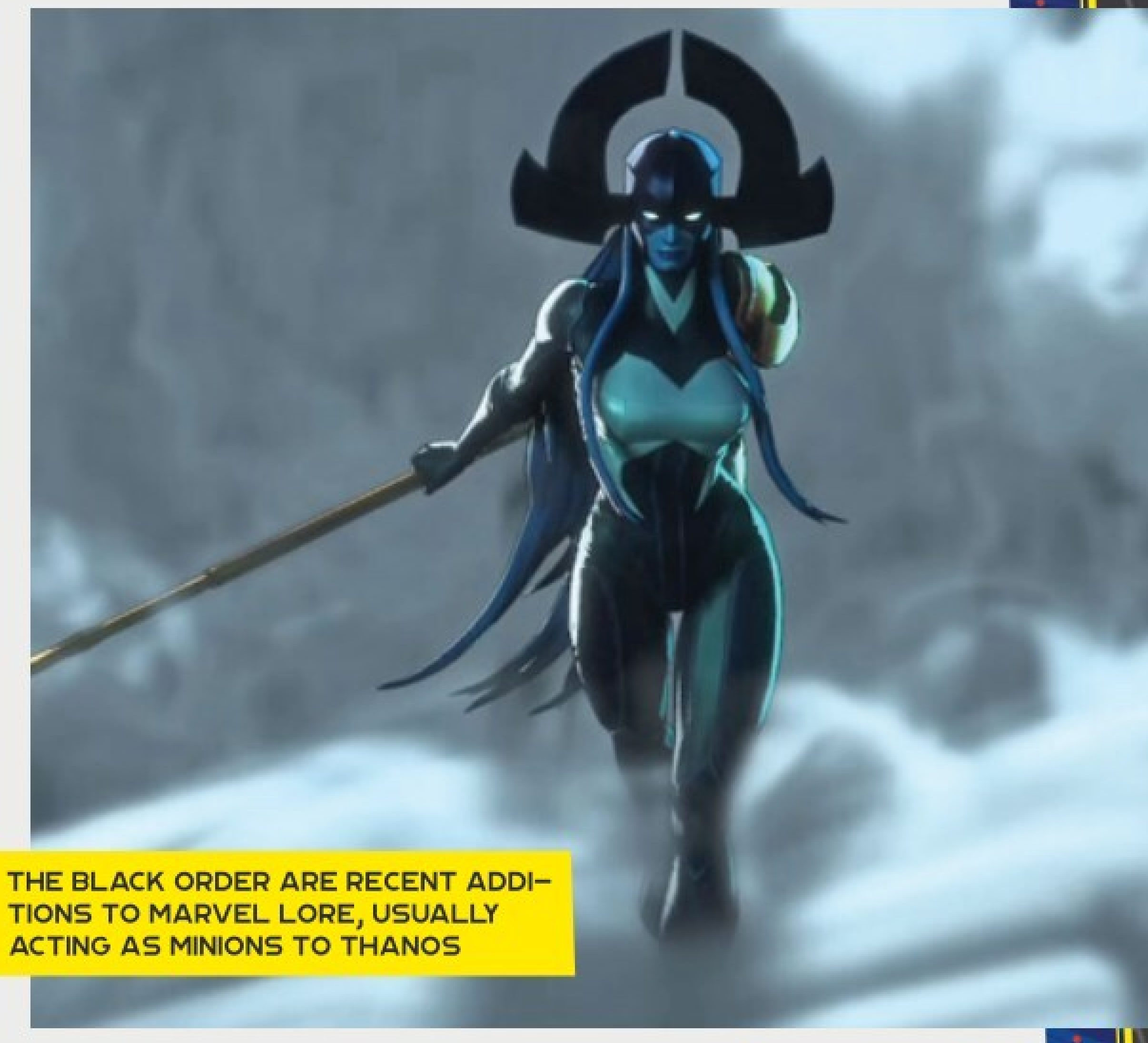
In the matter of the last year, the story of Thanos and the Infinity Stones have catapulted from comic fan territory to exhaustive cultural awareness. With *Avengers: Endgame* having now culminated years of movie storytelling, Marvel could hardly find a more relevant time to resurface a video game that echoes that same story conceit and wide-reaching character team-up mentality. “It’s a new take on the Infinity Stones storyline, unique to this game,” Trinen says. “As a Marvel comics and movie fan, I really like that it walks the line between the two. You’ll see characters that are closer to what you see in the comics, and others that may feel similar to what you see in the movies. It’s a nice blending of the Marvel universe in one game, which is sort of what Ultimate Alliance has always been about.”

For Marvel, it’s also about more than just playable heroes – it’s a chance to let fans virtually visit locales that already hold a memorable place in their imagination, and fight big villains from across the fiction. “It doesn’t stop at the Black Order; there’s a whole other rogues gallery of Marvel villains that you’re going to have to contend with.” Jones says. “If what we’ve already shown is any indication, you’ve gone from a Kree ship in the beginning to the Raft and met some of Spider-Man’s villains, to the Shadowland and New York to meet Daredevil and Kingpin, to Avengers Tower and the X-Mansion, and more. These are places you can go, villains you can punch in the face, all of which will be new.”

But there’s also something exciting about the way the Marvel Ultimate Alliance series is making its way back into players’ hands. With its nature as both portable and a home console, the Switch supports the idea of a superheroic journey that can be picked up and played in a variety of situations. Four-player co-op on one system lets the family gather around the couch. Local online play allows players to bring their Switch to a comic convention or park and throw down with new friends. And solo players can choose to go online and join with friends across the world.

If Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3 can hit the sweet spot, combining nostalgia for the series, love of familiar characters, and taut arcade-style action, then Nintendo, Marvel, and Team Ninja could have a hit on their hands. For friends and families who are already anticipating living out their own Marvel adventures, it’s now just a matter of waiting a couple more months and starting the arguments over who gets to lay claim to which heroes on that enormous character select screen. ◆

Looking to learn more about Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3? We’ll have additional character profiles, hands-on impressions, and lots more rolling out throughout the month at gameinformer.com/mua3



THE BLACK ORDER ARE RECENT ADDITIONS TO MARVEL LORE, USUALLY ACTING AS MINIONS TO THANOS

DEAD IN THE WATER

The Until Dawn developer charts new territory with Man of Medan, the first game in The Dark Pictures anthology

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Adventure

» PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

» DEVELOPER
Supermassive Games

» RELEASE
Summer

When Supermassive Games launched Until Dawn in 2015, it was unsure if the cinematic horror game would resonate with audiences. The tale about eight teenagers taking a vacation to a secluded cabin melded player choice with intense sequences and surprise twists, and it quickly became a cult hit. The studio knew its next blockbuster had to be something more grand than the "obvious sequel." As Until Dawn was wrapping production, the team began working on a prototype that would bring together the studio's strengths and passions. One thing was clear from the onset: It had to a be horror game. "With horror, it's kind of in our blood," says CEO and executive producer Pete Samuels.

Supermassive Games wears its love for the horror genre on its sleeve. Walking through the studio, posters for films such as *The House of the Devil* and *The Innkeepers* line the walls. A statue of Until Dawn's The Psycho is a formidable presence, standing proudly among the macabre decor. "I think it's fair to say we all watch a lot of horror movies," says game director Tom Heaton. "They're always a big point of reference early in [our games'] story development. We're looking for all sorts of tropes in horror movies that we can use and exploit. We're trying to make things that are familiar to an audience that loves horror movies." One thing the team loves is dissecting the latest gem in horror. Netflix's supernatural anthology *The Haunting of Hill House* was one of the more recent must-watch picks for research. The group got so into the series, it became a "watch now or be spoiled situation" because they needed to discuss its finer points and see what they could learn from it.

This genuine enthusiasm for the genre helped Supermassive when it came time to start planning its next big project. "We were really keen to tell more horror stories, kind of in the way we put together Until Dawn, which was very much about mashing together different subgenres of horror and taking the tropes from each," Samuels says. The team sat down and just listed every horror subgenre they could think of and came up with 42. With the wealth of possibilities, it was clear that one game would not be enough to capture all the unique tales the team wanted to tell, but they soon found a solution that would allow them to tackle more subjects than ever before.

Supermassive has never shied away from risks and has learned many things in its time as a studio, working on everything from LittleBigPlanet DLC to atmospheric VR titles [see sidebar]. A horror anthology of five games with two coming out each year until the finale seemed like something novel in the video game space and gave them a way to tell a variety of stories all with their own flavor of horror. Each episode will combine two of their favorite subgenres.

First up in Supermassive's The Dark Pictures anthology is Man of Medan, which uses the classic home-invasion and ghost-ship scenarios, but with some twists on these well-worn tropes. Every game in the anthology employs one big-name actor; Shawn Ashmore (X-Men, *The Following*), who previously starred in Remedy's Quantum Break, takes the mantle for Man of Medan. To discover more about this first entry in the five-game anthology, we visited Supermassive Games at its studio in Guildford, England to chat with the team and get hands-on with the game.

A fun getaway to do an extraordinary dive. What could possibly go wrong?

SETTING THE STAGE

Man of Medan is based on a famous legend about the ship *Ourang Medan*, whose entire crew perished under suspicious circumstances in the 1940s. During our trip, we saw the tutorial, which acts as a prologue to set up the present-day events of the main game. Set in 1947, the opening focuses on two soldiers named Joe and Charlie, who are throwing a few back while docked on the Chinese mainland. The pair do everything from practicing their punching skills on a wooden dummy to Joe having his fortune told, which paints a grim picture with the death card appearing, leaving him startled and shaken. After going back to the ship, the pair get into a drunken fight, which leads to them both being knocked out by their superior and taken somewhere to sleep it off.

When they come to, piercing screams alert them to the fact that something has gone awry. As they search the ship, they find their fellow comrades dead, all with reddened eyes and a look of terror on their faces. Footsteps and the voices of children, alternating between yelling for help and laughing, can be heard as you wander the vessel, adding to the tension alongside a few well-timed jump scares. As you get deeper into the ship, a strange miasma radiates from crates with skull symbols on them, alluding to the contents possibly having something to do with the mysterious deaths. I won't spoil what happens next, but based on the circumstances, it's not looking good for the soldiers. You know they're walking into a bad situation and whatever is on the ship with them isn't friendly. With one final scare that gives you your first look at the sinister force at play, you're then moved to present day.

Why Not An Until Dawn Sequel?

Until Dawn was a breakout hit for Supermassive Games, so much so the studio went on to create two PSVR-experiences based on it. The spin-off Until Dawn: Rush of Blood is a rail-based shooter that uses characters and locations from the original game, while survival horror game The Inpatient is a prequel set 60 years before the events of Until Dawn. Supermassive has heard the demands for an Until Dawn sequel. However, the team wanted a clean slate and feels an anthology of standalone games will offer them more creative freedom.

"On an anthology, it's a great opportunity to wrestle with a new subject, a new genre, and with characters that you can develop specifically for that story. You're not tied to historical characters that you have to use," says game director Tom Heaton. Series producer Dan McDonald adds: "If we were making sequels, we don't know who survived. I mean we could probably work it out from your game save, but we don't want to make a sequel to that. We want to make a different story with different people."

You build relationships within your group, which can affect your dialogue and scenes

You can never really be sure if someone is truly dead

Fliss doesn't like to be bossed around on her ship, even if she is being held hostage

Welcome to the ghost ship

A VACATION GONE TERRIBLY WRONG

While Joe and Charlie's eerie incident serves as the origin story, the main adventure centers on five young adults, all tied to each other in different ways, out for a fun vacation to the South Pacific. The main highlight? A dive to a previously undiscovered World War II wreck. The group includes a pair of siblings, Julia and Conrad, plus their cohorts Alex and Brad. Julia and Alex have been in a long-term relationship, and they're at the point of deciding whether it's time to take the next step to marriage. Along with them is Fliss, their dive guide. It's obvious from the get-go these are wealthy people who have the luxury of taking a dive like this – even Fliss seems skeptical of their intentions and annoyed by their rich-kid attitudes. The majority of the group are experienced divers, and this trip is of particular importance to Brad, the resident nerd of the group. As a World War II enthusiast, nothing seems more tantalizing than searching a plane wreck with historical significance. He's done his research to ensure this is a trip to remember.

My demo takes place near the beginning of the game, where a certain decision colors your early interactions. Just like Until Dawn, Man of Medan features choices, relationship-building, and the possibility for any of your core characters to die at certain points. Since you can't reload saves, you live and die by your decisions, forcing you to press on with the consequences of your actions. These run the gamut of subtle choices, such as whether or not to drink a beer to high-pressure moments like deciding to help another or run to ensure the safety of the character you're controlling. Your decisions even help shape the personalities of the core cast, such as making them more heroic or cowardly.

Dialogue choices also alter your relationships with characters, and the game reflects these different states. "One of the things that's really important is the relationships between the different characters and [maintaining them] under extreme tension and duress," Heaton says. After seeing the popularity of relationship-building in Until Dawn, Supermassive put extra effort into giving them more depth and reward in Man of Medan. For instance, you unlock bonus scenes depending on whether you've minimized or maximized certain relationships.

"We really have to get your emotional engagement with the characters," Heaton says. "If you haven't got that emotional engagement, the jump scares, if they work at all, are going to be very hollow. It's when you really care about those characters that it's going to be effective."

I see the different ways relationships can change in a scene where Alex has recently popped the question to Julia and they're reflecting on her decision to say yes or no. If you say yes, the trip starts out with Alex and Julia all lovey dovey, excited about the future. However, if you have Julia say no, the tension and uncertainty of the future acts as a mood-killer. I played both of these states and noticed differences in dialogue and subtle changes in how events play out. Let's just say your vacation either starts off merrily or awkwardly, with a dark cloud hanging over it. No matter which way you begin, Julia's brother Conrad, who is exactly what you'd expect from an overconfident rich kid, wants to start the trip on a lighter note with a drink.

Depending on how you've played the game up to this point, Conrad could have a flirtation going with Fliss, which changes some scenes. Fliss may be starting a romance with Conrad, but she's also a little uneasy with the group and grows irritated when she realizes they took a bullet they found while diving. She tells them everything has an essence and is like "a ghost you invite to the surface." Little moments like these are littered throughout my demo, acting as premonitions for what's to come.

After Brad tells a ghost story, which you can be encouraging or dismissive toward as Julia, the group calls it a night and are soon soundly sleeping … until a group of creepy fishermen decide to board the ship, taping their mouths shut and tying them up. Apparently, Conrad and his big mouth had an altercation with them and he flashed his money during it, giving the fishermen a few ideas. Once they hold the group hostage, the choices really start to heat up.

Your actions can result in everything from giving you more information to getting a character killed. After playing two different playthroughs, I saw many branching paths and different scenarios. One choice allowed me to obtain intel on Brad's whereabouts, but in another playthrough I had no idea if he was okay. Mouth off and take things too far as Conrad and you can say goodbye to a part of your ear. If you agreed to Alex's proposal, Julia's ring gets stolen by the thieves. These are a just a few of the variations I encountered.

The most tense scene I experienced involved Fliss. One of the kidnappers wants you to call the coast guard to find out more about the current storm and its duration. He firmly warns you there will be consequences if you try anything. You have the opportunity to say something immediately or play along. Later you're asked if everything is okay and told to reach out if there is an issue. It's almost like the game is daring you to take the risk. I didn't, though. Instead, I chose to stay silent as he said one last time to let him know if something is wrong. I figured silence might indicate that something is awry, but I won't know the larger ramifications of that choice until I play the game in its entirety.

To give you a taste of the branching paths and just how quickly things can change, one scenario has Conrad trying to escape and board a lifeboat. To successfully sneak past the kidnappers without being seen, you must "stay calm," which puts you in a minigame where you sync up your button presses to the rhythm of a heartbeat. Succeed and you can get on the boat and drive away, or you can choose to help your friends. Get caught and you're tossed back with the group, unable to launch a sneak attack. In another instance, as Conrad drove away in the boat, an unexpected gunshot made me miss a quick-time event (QTE), causing him to get shot to death.

As you can see, characters can end up in different states and places depending on your actions. This is only the start of the adventure; as my demo ends, the storm flings our boat into a ghost ship that comes out of nowhere. Yes, you'll be finding out its mysteries, but that's exploring you'll do once the game comes out.

Supermassive says Man of Medan takes about half of a playthrough of Until Dawn, which took most players 10-12 hours to complete. That doesn't mean it's lacking substance. "The amount of branching and the amount of variation on different playthroughs is far greater than anything we've done before," Samuels says.

Mechanically, the game is similar to what we saw in Until Dawn, with QTEs and dialogue choices. The heartbeat mechanic is new, alongside a mashing QTE for moving objects or obstacles that are stuck. Similar to Until Dawn's totems, as you search, you find so-called "premonitions," which show how a character could potentially die, acting as a heads-up so you can take caution with that scene as you play it. As you explore, you may also come across "secrets," mysterious objects that provide insight into your current situation. "You can't really work out much from just one of them," Heaton explains. "You make connections and start to piece them together for the backstory. It will unlock scenes where characters will talk about what they know and it can help you as a player. If you find enough, you get hints that allow you to make better decisions for the rest of the game."

At any point, you can tap a button and go into a menu that shows your relationship state with each character and the choices you've made if you want to see how things are shaping up. "We have a system that explains some of the consequences of your actions," Heaton says. "It's not a one-to-one map, but it gives you narrative context for your choices. It allows you to work out how you'll be able to do things a little bit differently when you go back and revisit it. We know from previous games that people love to go back and try to get different consequences for characters they really like, so obviously we've enabled that and this will help steer them toward how they can do things differently."

BUILDING SOMETHING NEW

Supermassive Games has shown its skill with the horror genre and giving the player memorable choices. Now it's time to see if the studio can go beyond what it did in Until Dawn and take on the tall order of an anthology that changes direction, casts, and uses different standbys of the horror genre with each chapter. "With [every game in the anthology], we're trying to surprise people every time in terms of what parts of real history they may refer to and which long-standing myths the stories nod to or recreate," Samuels says. "We're always trying to ground the stories in things that already exist."

While the plan is to have each game feel very distinct from the next, there is one common thread in a character called The Curator. He appears in every game, on hand to offer you advice if you ask for it, and finding out his larger role is part of the mystery. Due to this aspect, Supermassive was tight-lipped on giving any more specific details, but it's clear there's some payoff for following all the games. "He's got his own story arc that goes across the anthology," Samuels says. All the games are set in the same universe, but the stories are not connected in any way.

That doesn't mean Supermassive isn't putting little nods in for you to find. "I'll just say this – in Man of Medan, there are some things that are nods to the other games in development in The Dark Pictures series," Samuels says. "There's a challenge right there." Challenge accepted. ◈

Borderlands 3

Moving beyond Pandora

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter (4-Player Online)

» Publisher
2K Games

» Developer
Gearbox Software

» Release
September 13

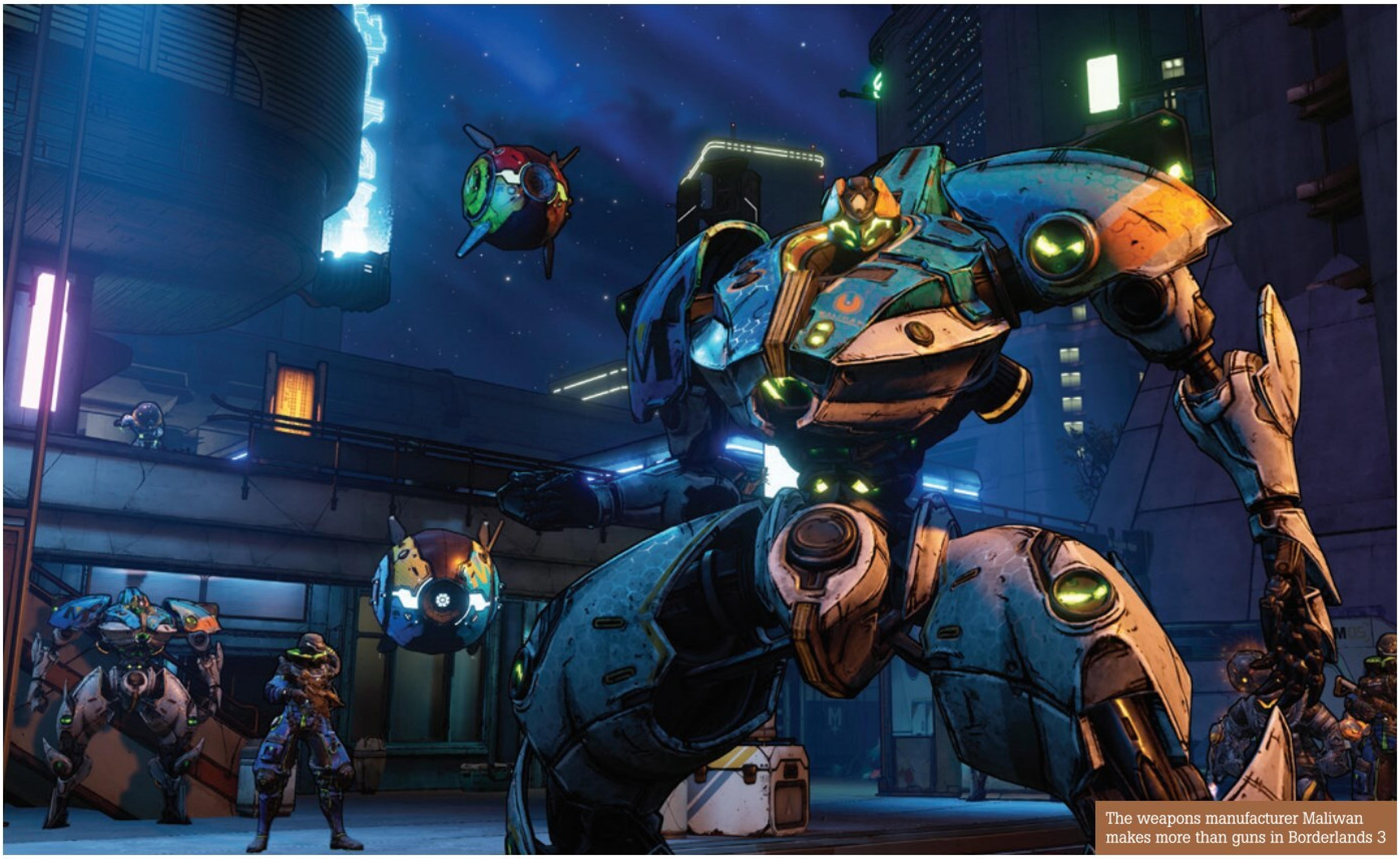
Gearbox has officially proven it can count to three with the long-awaited (albeit well-telegraphed) reveal for the next Borderlands. Its existence may not have come as a complete shock, but the first wave of Borderlands 3 info shows there's plenty of room for surprises. Guns with legs, anyone?

The Borderlands series has delivered loads of variety when it comes to character builds, enemy types, and – of course – the gob-smacking number of guns, but its action has largely taken place on the same planet of Pandora. It's a great place filled with ravaged settlements and local wildlife that wants nothing more than to nibble on your corpse. Still, a little more variety is welcome. Borderlands 3 broadens those horizons significantly. Players now have access to a ship, Sanctuary 3, which serves as your hub space during the campaign and boasts private (and customizable) quarters for your heroes. From there, you can travel to other planets, each of which provides its own unique challenges.

We've grown accustomed to Pandora's rusted, corrugated metal shacks and tattered encampments, but a change of scenery is an exciting addition. Gearbox is remaining tight-lipped about those specific locations for now, but we've seen glimpses of creepy swamps, places with pagoda-like buildings and huge walls, and honest-to-goodness cities with skyscrapers and paved streets. These places serve as the playgrounds for the latest crew of four new Vault Hunters, which simultaneously offer fresh, but familiar, takes on the archetypes and roles that Borderlands players expect.

Moze is the Gunner, though with the abundance of firearms available in Borderlands, that moniker seems fairly generic. Perhaps "The One Who Summons A Giant Mech" would be a more apt description of the role she plays. In contrast to Borderlands 2's Gaige, this piece of tech is a vehicle as well as an automaton. After digistructing the Iron Bear into reality, she can climb inside for an additional destructive boost. Better still, a teammate can board, too, and control the mech's back-mounted turret for even more firepower.

Unlike previous Siren incarnations, Amara is all about getting into (and wrecking) faces. You all remember Brick, the rage-fueled pugilist from the first Borderlands? Imagine if he could have used some of that kooky Siren power to conjure up six more fists. In addition to knocking enemies senseless, those ethereal limbs can also help by grabbing and holding down opponents – perfect for when a crowd can use a little management. When you need some breathing room, you can



The weapons manufacturer Maliwan makes more than guns in Borderlands 3

still lean on classic Siren abilities like Phaselock, too.

Zane is the Operative of the group, relying on stealth and gadgets to maintain his streak of, well, being alive. Similar to Borderlands 2's Zero, he can project decoys of himself to distract enemies, which enable him to slip to safety or sneak up behind them to deliver devastating attacks. He's also equipped with a drone, though we're not quite sure if it acts as a recon tool or an A.I.-controlled teammate. Either away, it never hurts to have a buddy in battle, especially if you can't round up an actual friend to play.

FL4K fills a role previous Borderlands games have been missing. As the Beastmaster, they're essentially a pet class. They have several different tamed beasts at their disposal, including a Skag, Spiderant, and what looks like a two-armed Bullymong (with a gun). Each critter has its own special abilities, which help sell the fantasy of being some kind of maniacal Pokémon trainer.

The other major new faces aren't quite as friendly. The Calypso Twins are the leaders of the Children of the Vault cult, and they're clearly up to no good. In one quick scene from the reveal trailer, Lilith, the Siren from the first Borderlands game, crawls away from the gloating duo. To make matters worse, it looks as though she's been stripped of her runes – and, potentially, her powers. In another sequence, we see the male twin sporting red facial runes of his own, perhaps indicating he has somehow developed the ability to steal their power.

Borderlands' striking cel-shaded style looks great on contemporary hardware

In addition to Lilith, the first trailer for the game highlights a ton of returning characters from Borderlands' past. Sir Hammerlock, Ellie, Marcus, and others make appearances, as does Rhys from Tales From the Borderlands (though he is no longer voice by Troy Baker). According to Gearbox, Rhys isn't the only Tales character who will be in the game, either. Tiny Tina's back as well, though she appears to be about five or six years older. Unless there's some time-traveling shenanigans in play, her age provides a rough estimate of when Borderlands 3 fits into the greater timeline.

I wasn't kidding about the guns with legs, either. Special weapons can sprout stubbly little legs and move around the battlefield on their own, spouting insults and taunts as they do it. Gearbox also promises "firearms with self-propelling bullet shields" and "rifles that spawn fire-spawning volcanoes." Better yet, loot can be instanced, meaning your squad of four won't have to squabble over who gets what drop. If you like the old-school "first come, first served" style of grabbing loot, however, you can revert to that style as well.

Fans have been patient awaiting the next major installment in the Borderlands universe, but they won't have to wait much longer. Borderlands 3 arrives this September. » **Jeff Cork**

TOWER 3
30-JÄHRIGES JU
HOTEL FRIEDEN

Wolfenstein: Youngblood

One violent timewarp

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Bethesda Softworks

» Developer
MachineGames,
Arkane Studios

» Release
July 26

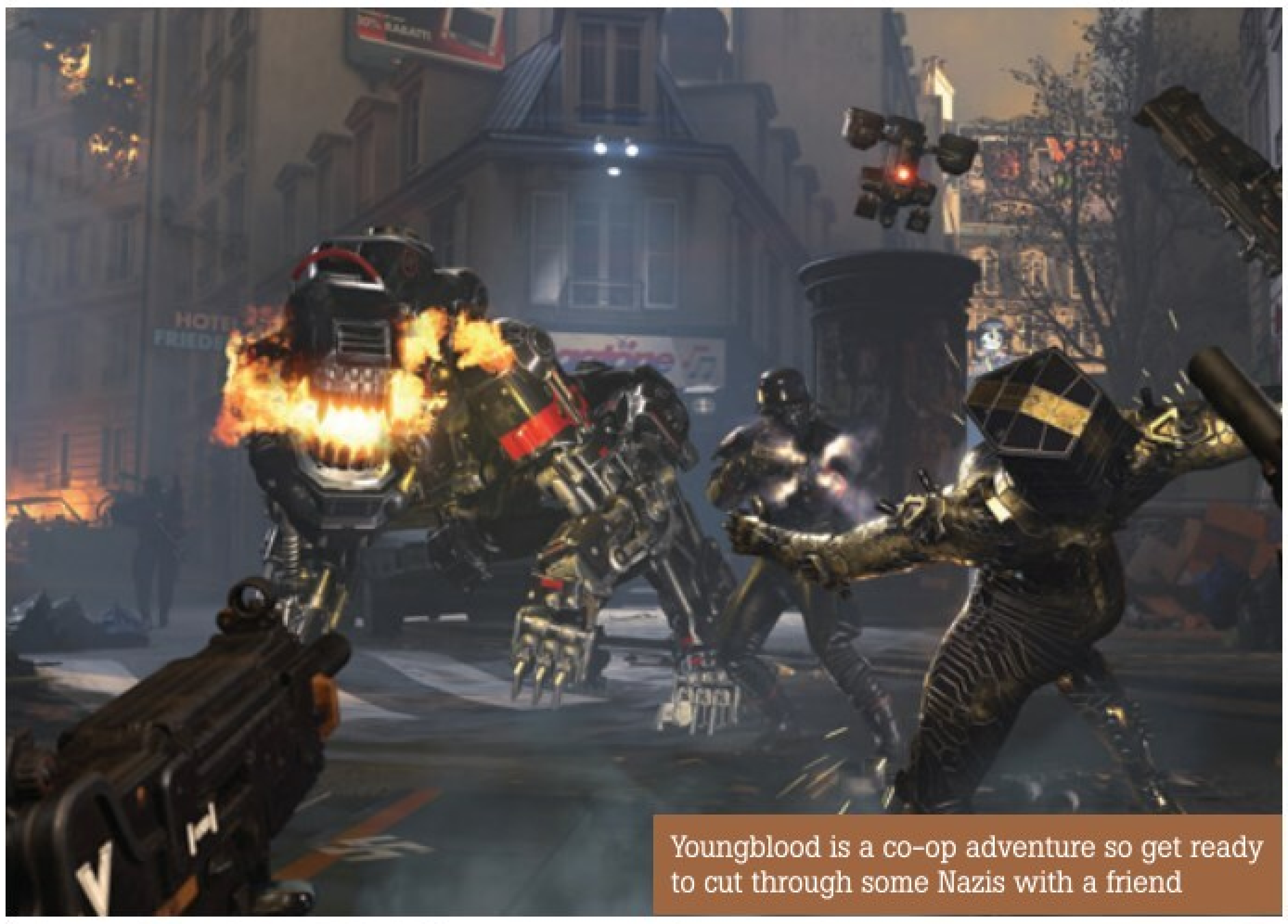
In April, Bethesda finally unveiled the world's first in-depth look at the latest Wolfenstein title, and there were more than a handful of revelations. Set nearly 20 years after the end of The New Colossus, Youngblood is the first Wolfenstein game starring someone other than noble and world-weary soldier B.J. Blazkowicz. Instead, his twin daughters Jess and Soph take up the splashy duties of killing Nazi scum as they try and find out where their missing father has gone. Youngblood is also the first Wolfenstein in MachineGames' stable to have another studio co-developing it: Dishonored creators Arkane Studios.

Billed as a co-op shooter, players take on Nazis in the streets of Paris with a friend at their side or an A.I. partner. During the trailer, we watched as Jess and Soph wielded The New Colossus' most powerful weapons, including the Sturmgewher rifle and the ricochet-blasting Shockhammer shotgun. Jess and Soph's power armor also suggests they'll likely have offensive-based abilities, though the trailer showcased only weapon-based gameplay.

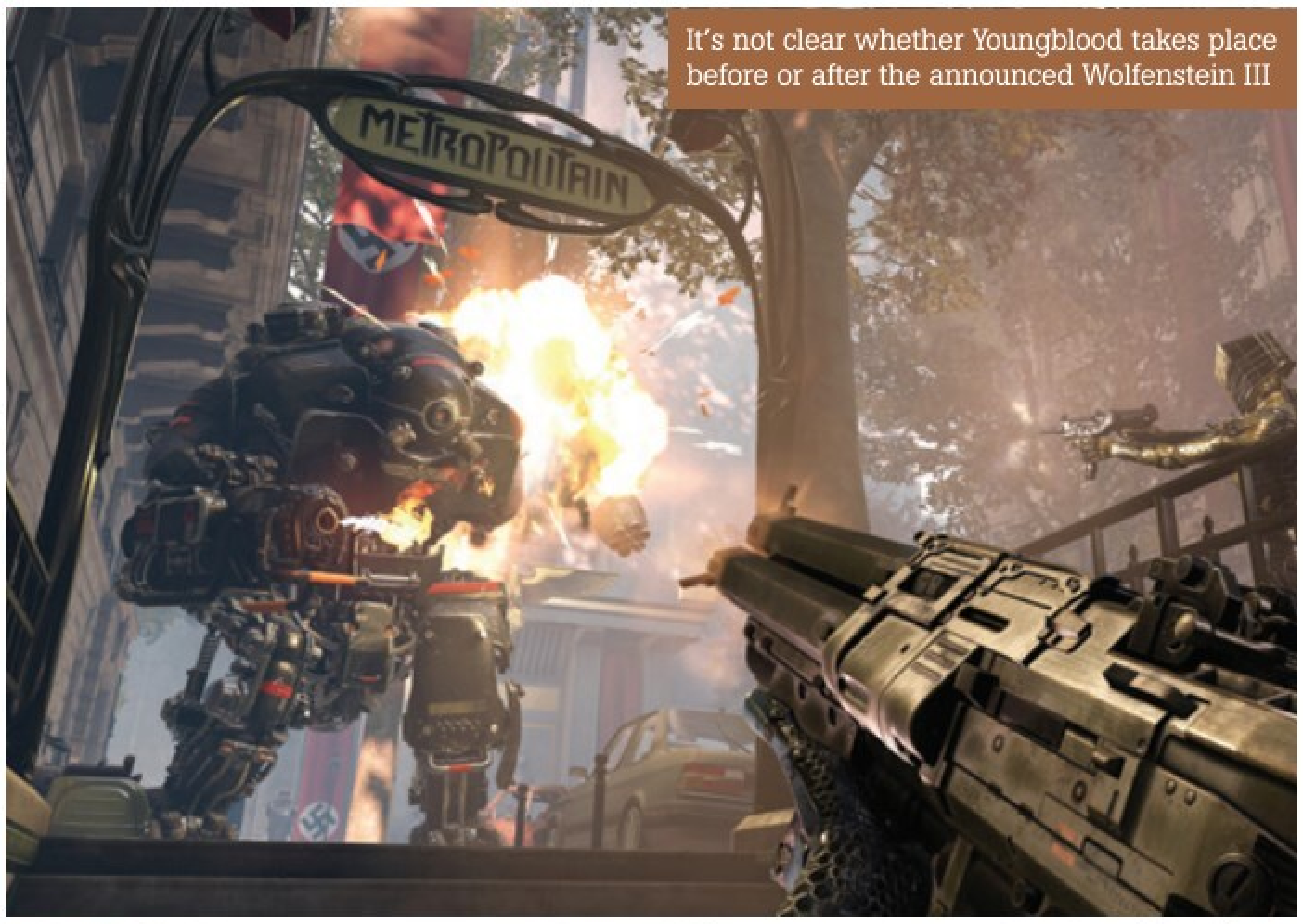
While the moment-to-moment gameplay in the reveal looks as solid as everything we enjoyed about The New Colossus, the most interesting details in the trailer were about about the fates of fan-favorite characters in the years since The New Colossus. Anya and B.J. were featured prominently, as was former Black Panther Grace, who's now apparently the head of the FBI in Youngblood's liberated America. However, colorful characters like Wyatt, Fergus, Sigurn, Max Hass, and Horton were missing, prompting questions about their survival in the years following the revolution against the Nazi regime.

While Youngblood is not the next big chapter in MachineGames' Wolfenstein trilogy (Bethesda has confirmed the finale is in the works), it will likely offer more than enough for fans to chew on. We're quite pleased to see Youngblood taking story-related risks that the previous Wolfenstein released between major entries, The Old Blood, avoided. A lot of questions remain for Youngblood. How will Jess and Soph fill their father's boots? How will Arkane's expertise on player freedom and level design figure into MachineGames' love of linear shooters? Will Wolfenstein's brand of high-risk run-and-gun translate well to a cooperative multiplayer experience? We won't have to wait long to find out the answers to these questions, as Youngblood debuts at the end of summer to the anticipation of hatchet-wielding Nazi slayers everywhere.

» Javy Gwaltney



Youngblood is a co-op adventure so get ready to cut through some Nazis with a friend



It's not clear whether Youngblood takes place before or after the announced Wolfenstein III

Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey

Harnessing the power of evolution

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player
Action/Adventure

» Publisher
Private Division

» Developer
Panache Digital Games

» Release
2019

The gaming populace has been eagerly awaiting the next project from Patrice Désilets, the creative director of the original Assassin's Creed up until Brotherhood. We recently got a good grasp of what to expect from his next title after visiting his studio in Montreal.

When Désilets first opened Panache Digital Games five years ago, he hoped to work on 1666: Amsterdam, a game he conceived at THQ that was later acquired by Ubisoft. After a long legal battle to regain his legal rights to the project (which he finally did), the title is still yet to reach the development phase.

Instead, Désilets and company shifted gears and are now focusing on the studio's first release, Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey. While it's inspired by history like Assassin's Creed, the game itself is a big departure from Désilets' past works.

Ancestors is a survival game with a focus on evolution, in which you play as an ape through multiple generations. It takes place between 10 and 2 million years ago and from Africa, including a tropical jungle and the savannah. With each passing generation, you see your apes evolve more towards a *Homo sapien*.

"The final species you play as has not much hair, walks on two feet, and starts to resemble more of a human," Désilets says.

Surviving in Ancestors is far from easy. Outside of having to take care of your own needs (drinking, eating, and sleeping) you also have to watch out for predators. These can be vipers, crocodiles, boars, and more that all attempt to kill you on sight. You can build makeshift weapons from things around you, like a sharpened stick, to ward them off and even defeat them.

Finding ways to survive is entirely up to you. Ancestors doesn't hold your hand. During the demo I played, I felt that it sometimes did this to a fault – a lot of the time it felt as though I was fumbling around in the dark, unsure of where to go next. Désilets explains that the core idea is to give players "epiphany" moments. I enjoyed how players are given the freedom to discover things themselves, but Panache still has some balancing to do when it comes to tutorials.

You can pick up leaves, plants, rocks, and whatever else you find in Ancestors, and inspect it so that your ape can gain more knowledge. These fire off neurons letting you learn new skills, which can later be upgraded and

unlocked on a skill-tree menu during sleep. Your abilities, such as being able to use both hands or swing a stick, transcend generations and characters.

Ancestors offers three game modes: First Time Experience, which begins with guiding you thanks to a couple tutorial objectives; Survival Mode, which drops you randomly in the map and tasks you with surviving alone; and Custom, where you can return to somewhere you've already visited and start the game with a custom number of clan members.

"When people play the actual game, Survival and Custom will be locked at first [until they progress further]," Désilets says.

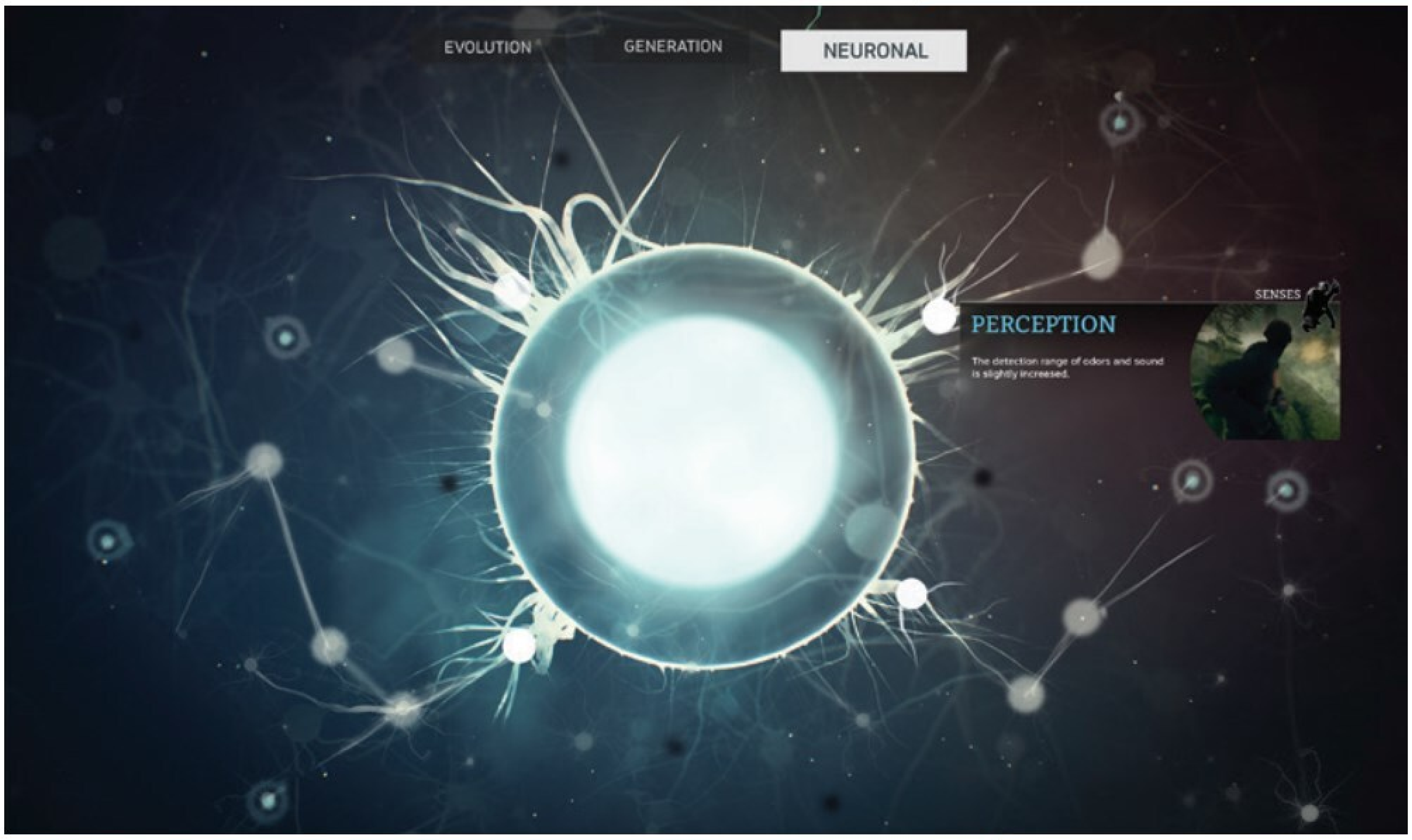
It will be no surprise to Assassin's Creed fans that climbing is an essential part of Ancestors, particularly when it comes to scaling trees. Unfortunately, I struggled with some of the controls. You auto-climb everything in Ancestors, meaning that I was latching onto cliff-sides and rocks when running past, even when I didn't want to. When I did want to climb, especially atop trees, I often missed the targeted branch that I wanted to hop towards because of imprecise controls.

Despite the need for polish, it's clear that Ancestors is creating something altogether different and fascinating by letting us experience evolution first-hand.

"It tells that story of us [as apes] in a tree, going down and standing up and becoming who we are," Désilets says.

Ancestors will cost $39.99 at launch and arrives at some point later this year.
» **Elise Favis**

Ancestors takes place 10 million years ago and progresses all the way until two years ago



The detection range of odors and sound is slightly increased.

You get to explore all over Africa, including its jungles and the savannah

Divinity: Fallen Heroes

Larian's beloved role-playing series gets a tactical spin-off

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher**
Larian Studios

» **Developer**
Logic Artists,
Larian Studios

» **Release**
TBA

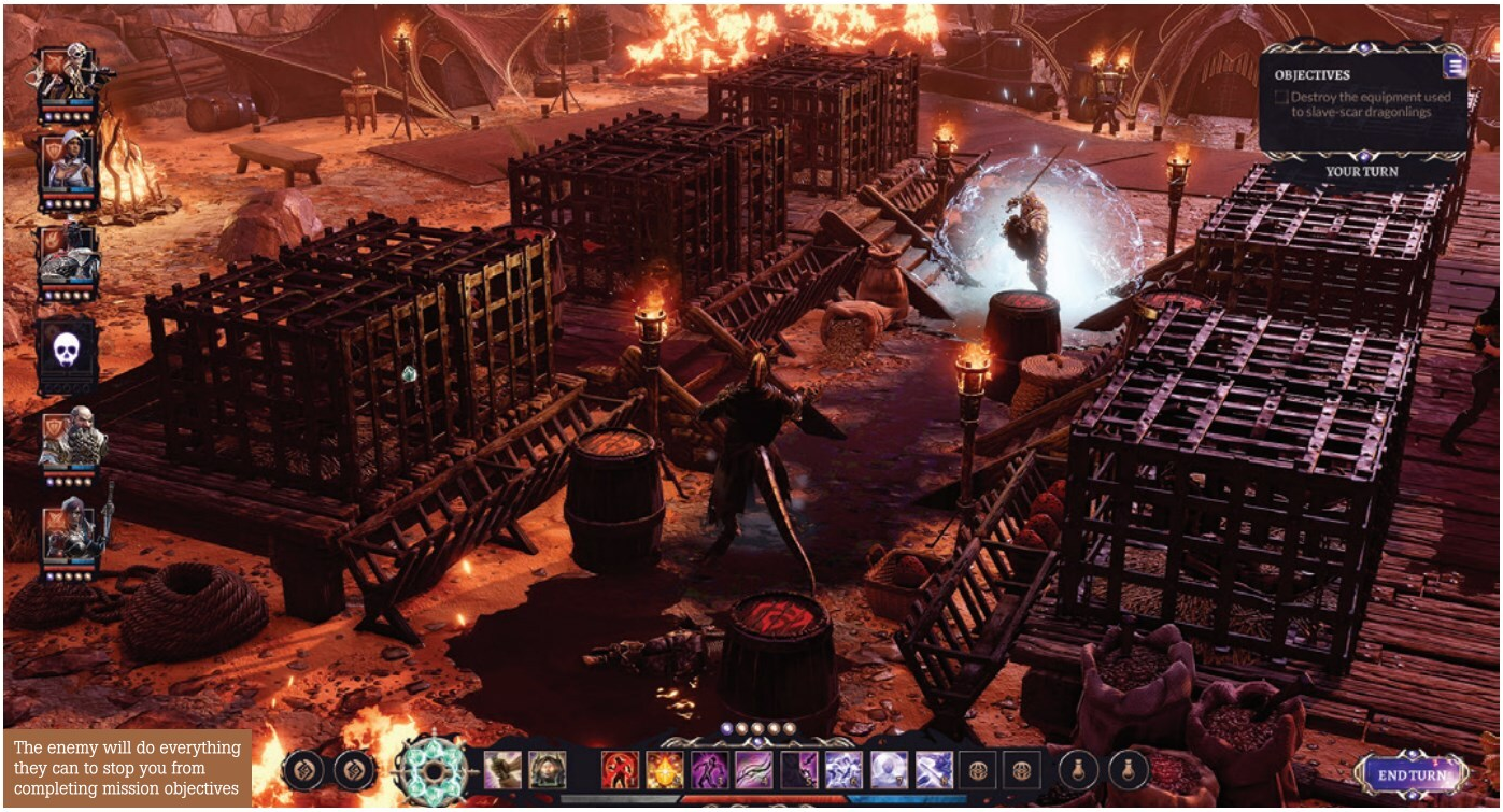
Divinity: Original Sin 2 is one of the greatest PC RPGs of all time, so what if you took the combat, abilities, and characters from that game and shipped them into an all-new tactical experience that continues the tale? Divinity: Fallen Heroes answers that question.

Using the ship *Lady Vengeance* as your home base, the XCOM-style fantasy has you moving from area to area, talking to NPCs, and preparing your loadouts before venturing into missions. Prior knowledge of the series helps immensely toward understanding the characters and story, which takes place directly after Original Sin 2, but isn't necessary to enjoying the game. After selecting a core hero to lead your troops, you choose from a basket of classic archetypes to round out your roster – mages, archers, rogues, warriors, clerics, and more. You get to take a few special items into battle as well from a large pool. I selected a magical apple that provides massive healing and restoration and an enchanted cowbell. The cowbell allows you to polymorph an enemy into a cow, and it quickly became my favorite item, both for flavor and functionality.

The challenging demo mission I played at PAX East tasked me with taking out several powerful ballista while fending off a horde of troops with their own deadly leader. The troops keep coming, so it's about balancing finishing the mission goals while ensuring your army survives. The ballista fire on your characters every turn as well, so there's a serious push toward forcing you to engage with the mission objective, using crowd control and judicious attacks to slay essential opponents while keeping your eye on the prize. While I successfully took out a couple of the turrets, I was eventually overwhelmed by the aggressive opponents. Planning your moves is critical to success, and my efforts at half-measures led me to ruin.

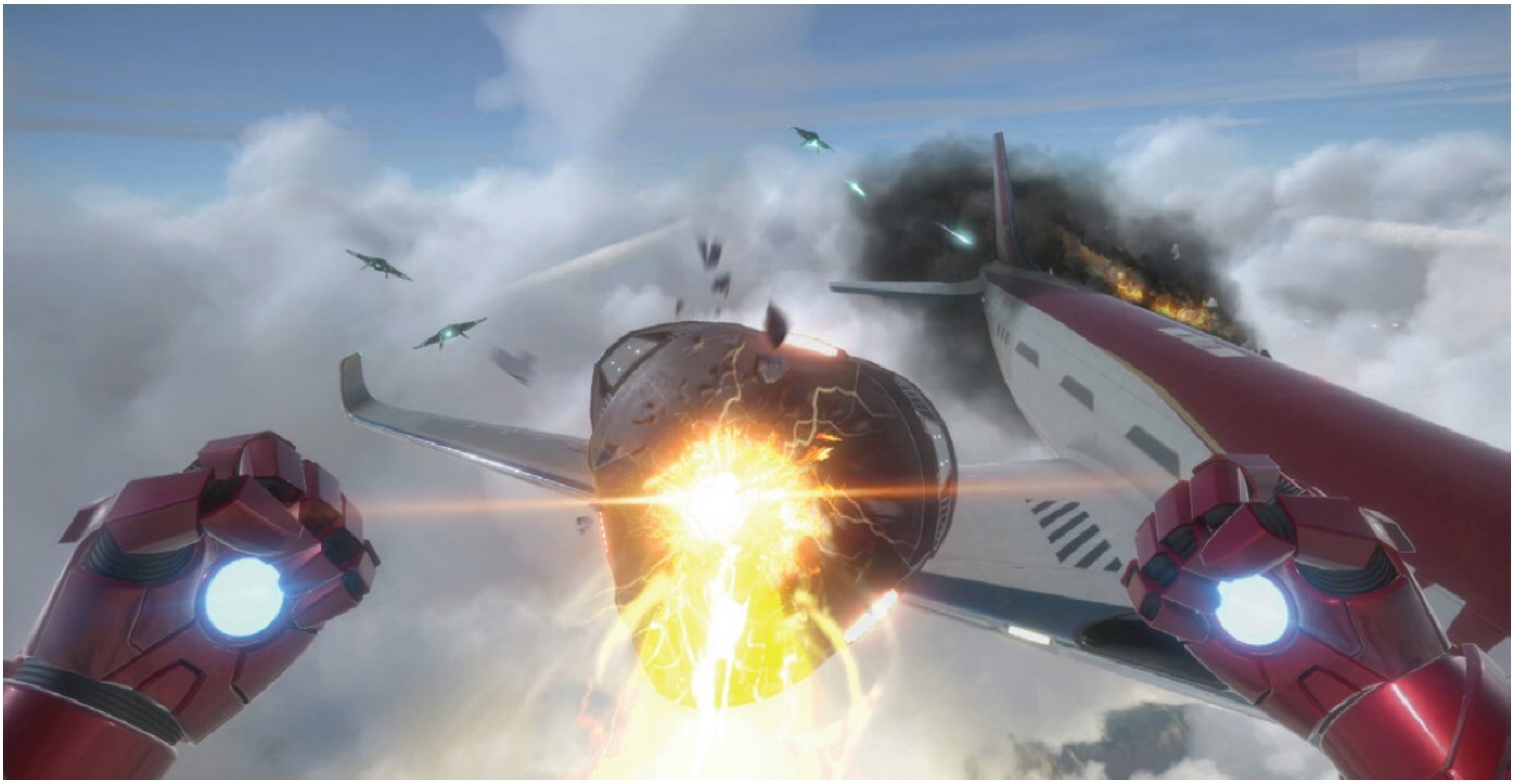
Many of the same abilities from Divinity: Original Sin 2 make their way into Fallen Heroes untouched, but some have been slightly altered for balancing purposes. Teleporting your enemies around is still a potent strategy, and there are new tactical considerations that must be weighed into your plans as well. One such addition is a gunpower-like substance littered on the ground that explodes at the slightest touch, doing significant damage and sending anyone on it flying, allowing for effective creation of killzones and area denial.

Divinity: Fallen Heroes doesn't have a release date yet, but it's capitalizing on some of the biggest strengths of the rejuvenated franchise, so I can't wait to start forming party compositions to get in there with swords and spells.
» **Daniel Tack**



☐ Destroy the equipment used to slave-scar dragonlings

The enemy will do everything they can to stop you from completing mission objectives



Iron Man VR

Putting on the suit

Few superhero power fantasies are as gripping as Iron Man. Perhaps because it feels a little less fantastical than the near-omnipotence of Superman, but still feels more incredible than leaping from rooftop to rooftop as Batman. The idea of putting on the Iron Man suit and flying through the air to fire repulsor beams holds a unique appeal that other superheroes do not. While it is often difficult for video games to emulate the childhood dream of actually becoming a superhero, Iron Man VR looks to be the best approximation yet.

Iron Man VR puts you in the place of Tony Stark, so much so that you never actually see the billionaire playboy with a heart of gold and nuclear fission during gameplay. For all intents and purposes, when you don the PSVR helmet, you are Tony Stark, and that includes when you are out of the suit and in cutscenes. Iron Man VR boasts a full story, wherein hacker extraordinaire Ghost is eager to see Tony Stark dead. Stark's voice sounds nothing like Robert Downey Jr., so fans expecting any level of movie authenticity there should take it on its own merits.

The VR controls require two Move controllers that act as Iron Man's gauntlets, and their positioning is key to nearly every action. The buttons control the thrusters that come out of your hands, so controlling yourself over the various axes of movement relies heavily on how well you can lose yourself in the daydream of being Iron Man. To outside observers, holding your hands to the side and double-pumping the Move buttons may look odd, but you will know that you just air-dodged a missile that whizzed right over your shoulder and looked cool doing it.

In the first mission, Ghost takes over Stark's plane with both Stark and Pepper Potts onboard. Drones blow up the side of the plane, jettisoning Stark and his Iron Man suit, who must then acquire and equip each piece of the suit individually while falling through the air. Catching the gloves and then putting on the helmet just in time to blast a piece of the plane's wing coming at you feels like the Avengers theme should be playing, if only just in your head.

The developers at Camouflaj are hard at work at making sure Iron Man VR feels like a fleshed-out world and defies expectations with free- roaming flight, side quests, exciting mission objectives, and embracing the dream of superhero flight with both hands. After decades of disastrous comic-book property adaptations, video games are finally getting the resources needed for the kind of quality titles these licenses have always needed. Hopefully Iron Man VR can stand up with the best of them when it takes flight later this year. » **Imran Khan**

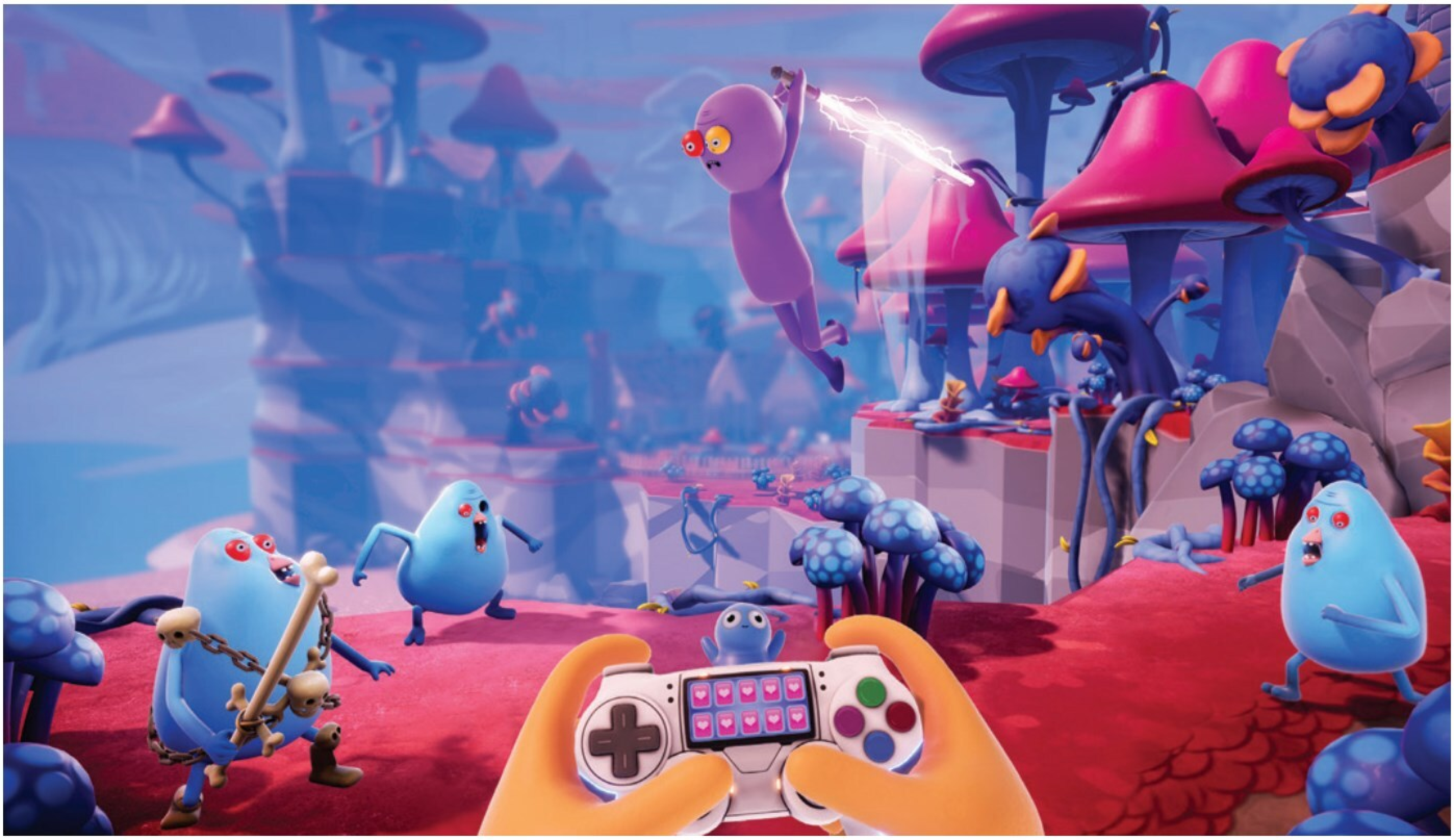
» **Platform**
PSVR

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» **Developer**
Camouflaj

» **Release**
2019



Trover Saves The Universe

A guy for an eye

» Platform
PSVR • Rift • Vive
PS4 • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Squanch Games

» Developer
Squanch Games

» Release
May 31 (PS4),
June 4 (PC)

A megalomaniacal alien named Glorkon has kidnapped your dogs and drawn on their power to turn himself into a nearly unstoppable force of nature bent on destroying the fabric of the universe. Sounds crazy, but this is just another day in the life in Trover Saves the Universe, a zany alien galaxy where people shove little creatures into their eyes and you are asked to save the universe without leaving your armchair.

Trover Saves The Universe is the next game from *Rick and Morty* co-creator Justin Roiland's studio, Squanch Games. Like the hit Adult Swim show, Trover is bursting with off-kilter characters and insult-heavy humor. You are a rare breed of alien that lives its entire life confined to an easy chair. As the game opens, you sit in your living room, watching a soap opera. On the TV, a man complains to his wife about how she never looks around the room or picks up objects, which serves as a roundabout tutorial that encourages players to look around the room and pick up objects. Squanch Games recorded a seemingly endless number of vocal lines, and as you interact with the environment the couple on the television subtly respond to your actions. Throughout the game, other characters and enemies similarly react to your choices, giving Trover's world an eerie sense of authenticity.

Before long, you are introduced to Trover, a foul-mouthed purple alien who draws power from the tiny creatures in his eyes. These creatures are called power babies, and they look like tiny people. Since you are confined to your chair for the whole game, Trover gives you a special device that allows you to control him, and Trover becomes your arms and legs in the world.

My first mission with Trover sent us on a hunt for a special crystal on a tropical jungle world. To explore each environment, you teleport among designated warp points, and then send Trover out into the field to do all the dirty work. The story conceit for teleporting around each world is that you must remain seated in your easy chair, but the game is designed to be played in VR, and that's the real reason for this limitation. I played my demo in VR, and teleporting around the environment kept the motion sickness at bay, but you can quickly swap between VR and TV modes on the fly if you need a change of perspective.

Trover's combat isn't complicated; I got through every encounter by mashing the attack button. The action is fairly relaxed, but I found it satisfying to tear through waves of fragile enemies using Trover's lightsaber-like weapon. Between battles, you engage in a few light platforming sequences and hunt for hidden power babies – the creatures that slot into Trover's eyes.

Most power babies are standard collectibles, but occasionally you find a power baby that unlocks a new power. At one point, I met a guy named Upgrade Tony who offered to give me a double jump power baby if I killed a bunch of wild ankle biters. I saw several critters behind a fence and made quick work of them, however, when I returned to Tony, he broke down crying and called me a monster because I had just murdered his pets. Apparently the wild ankle biters were somewhere else. He gave me the upgrade anyway – along with a few extra insults. If I had found the wild ankle biters, Tony wouldn't have been upset with me. Alternatively, I could have killed Tony's pets as well as the wild ankle biters and his commentary would have changed to reflect that as well.

Trover Saves The Universe features a wealth of creative alien worlds and goofy characters, but that creatively doesn't seem to extend to the gameplay, which seems fairly mindless so far. However, Trover's improv-heavy dialogue and off-brand humor are strong enough that I'm interested to see this journey to the end when Trover releases this May. » **Ben Reeves**

Concrete Genie

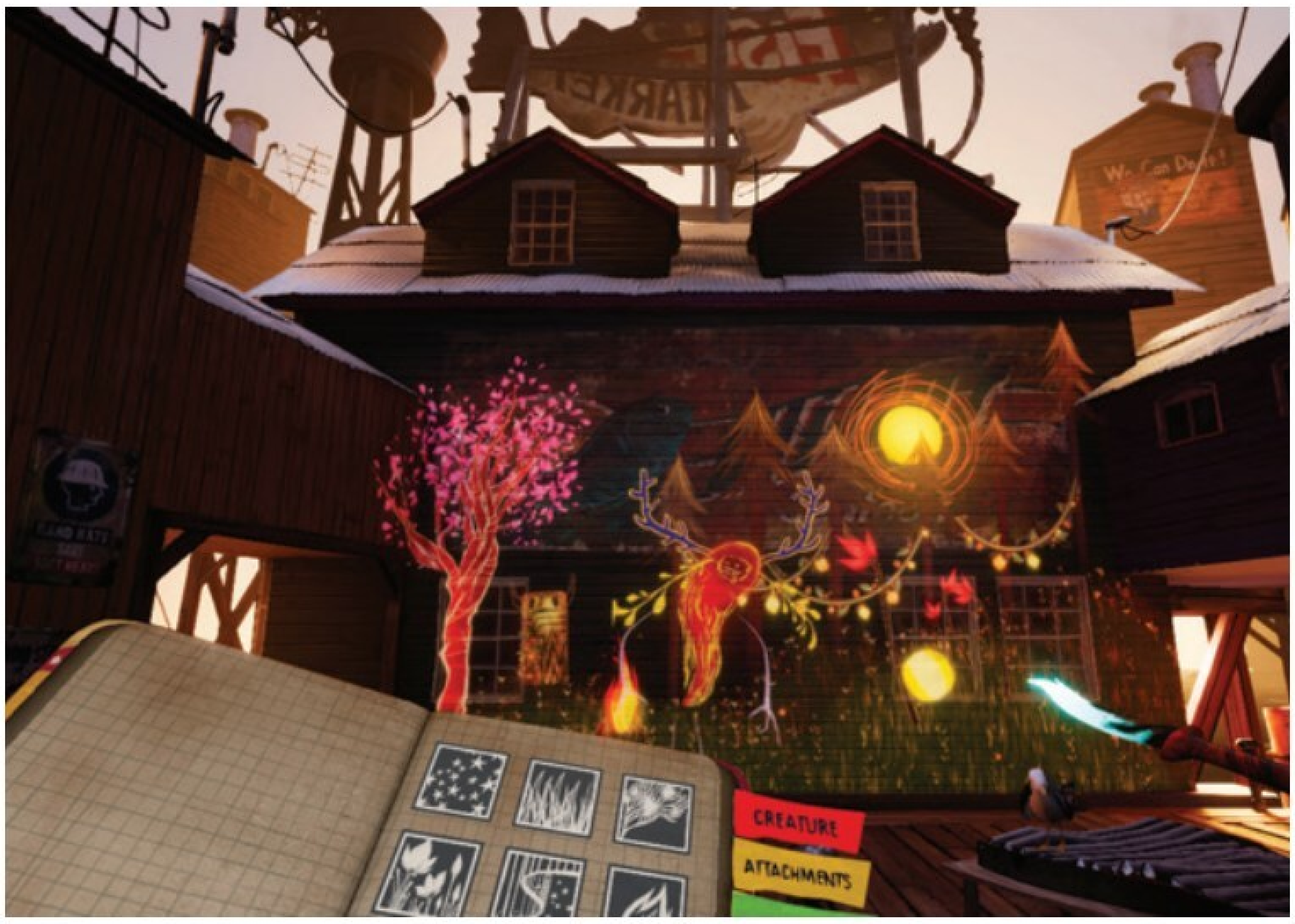
Coloring on the walls

Art is said to be the concrete representation of our most subtle feelings, an idea that certainly rings true when donning a PSVR headset and playing Concrete Genie. The game's teaser trailers thus far have promoted a message of expression at any cost. Whatever one might be feeling, art can be both the means to escape and the ability to empower, so it only makes sense that Concrete Genie's VR mode should carry that same message through a different avenue.

The VR mode uses two Move controllers to simulate a paint brush and a palette in either hand to paint the world around you. The painting mechanics take from the main game's mechanics, but puts you in a stationary first-person perspective rather than the story mode's third-person control of young Ash. Instead, VR mode has you discover the game's first genie, named Splotch, and go on a short adventure with them using your magic paint brush.

"When we pitched the original version of Concrete Genie internally, it was quite an obvious connection with the painting mechanics. We thought painting in first-person would be awesome in VR," says Dominic Robillard, creative director at Pixelopus.

The VR mode has a short objective-based story mode of its own and a free paint mode for players to get fully creative. In the story campaign, players get access to magic brushes a few at a time, essentially stamping them down with the move controller and tracing them along the flat walls of a cave to scale and reproduce. Eventually, Splotch brings you to a 3D world where you are literally painting the stars in the night sky with all the brushes at your disposal.



"We wanted a very emergent experience and, in order for that to work, we needed mechanics you could use to interact with the world in a lot of different ways," says Sony San Mateo Studio creative director Jeff Brown, who led the charge on the game's VR mode.

In the free paint mode, players can go to various locations from the main game and put their mark on the walls of and skies of different environments. In a dank cave, I filled the walls with grass and genies, then poured water from the tips of the ceiling to create a verdant rainforest on the side of a levee barely touched by sunlight.

While the VR mode may not be the main attraction for players interested in Concrete Genie, those who own PSVR headsets can interact with the game in a way that is not bound by limitations.

» **Imran Khan**

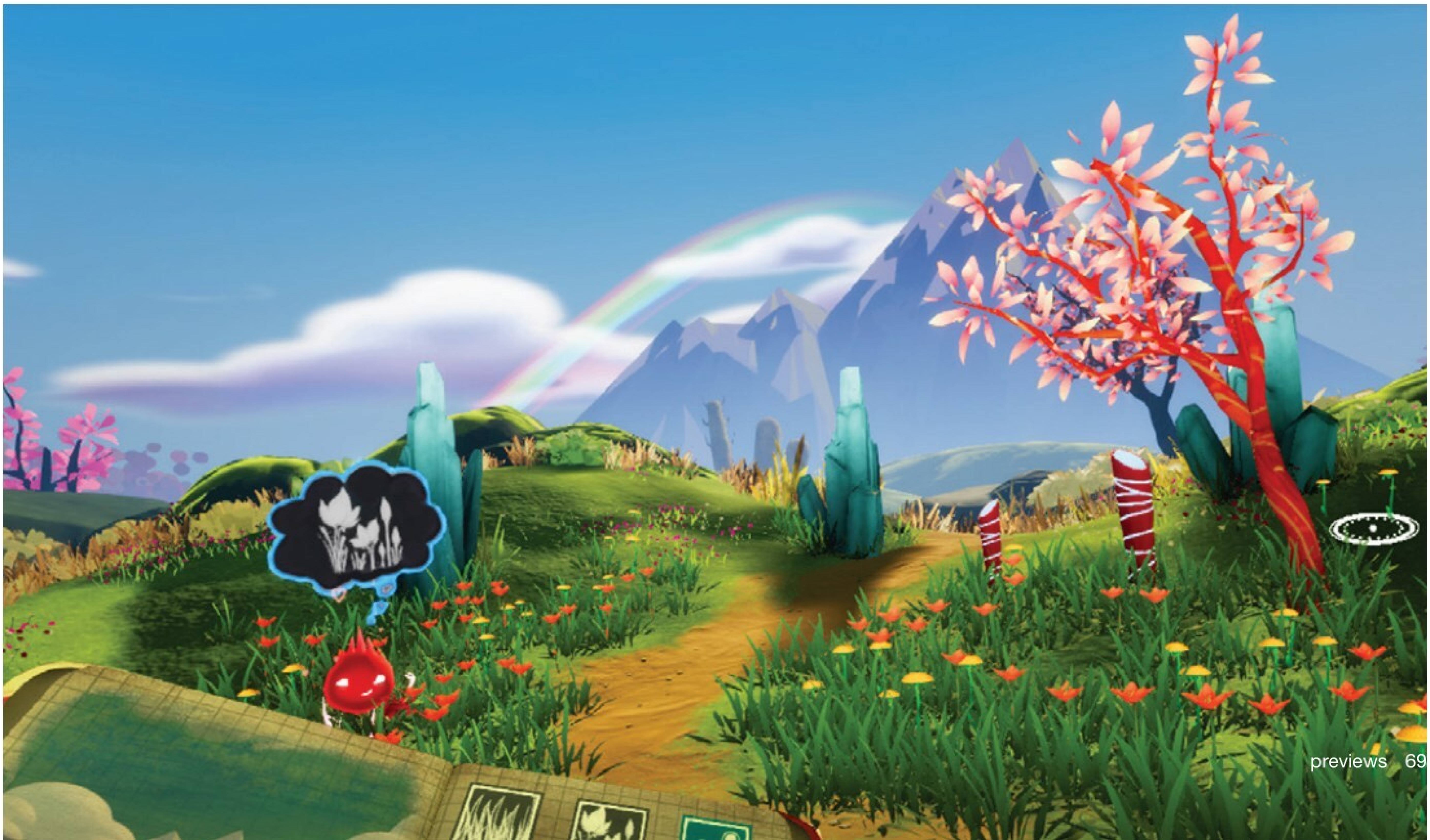
» **Platform**
PSVR • PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Sony Interactive Entertainment

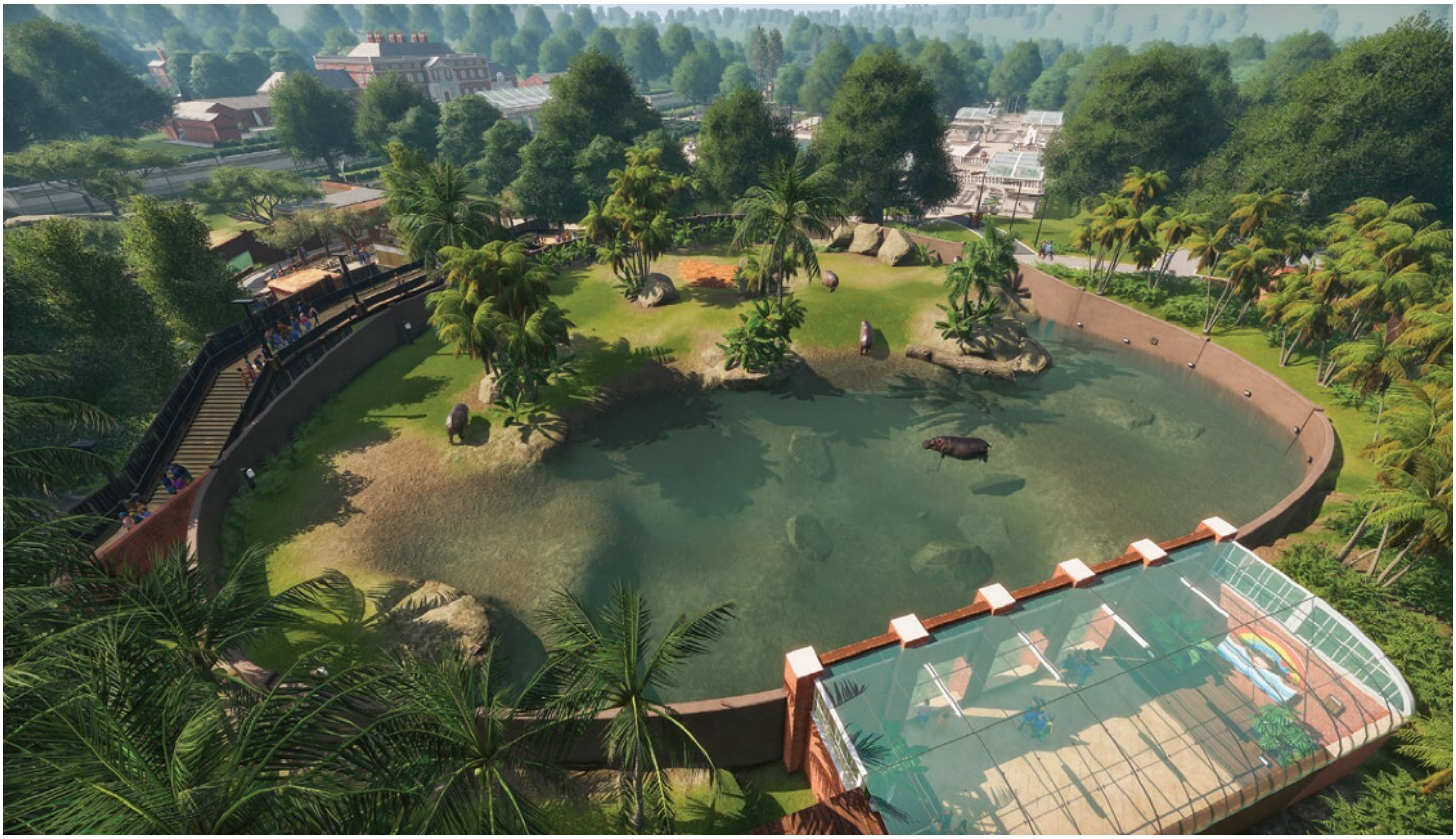
» **Developer**
Pixelopus

» **Release**
Fall



Planet Zoo

We bought a zoo



» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Simulation

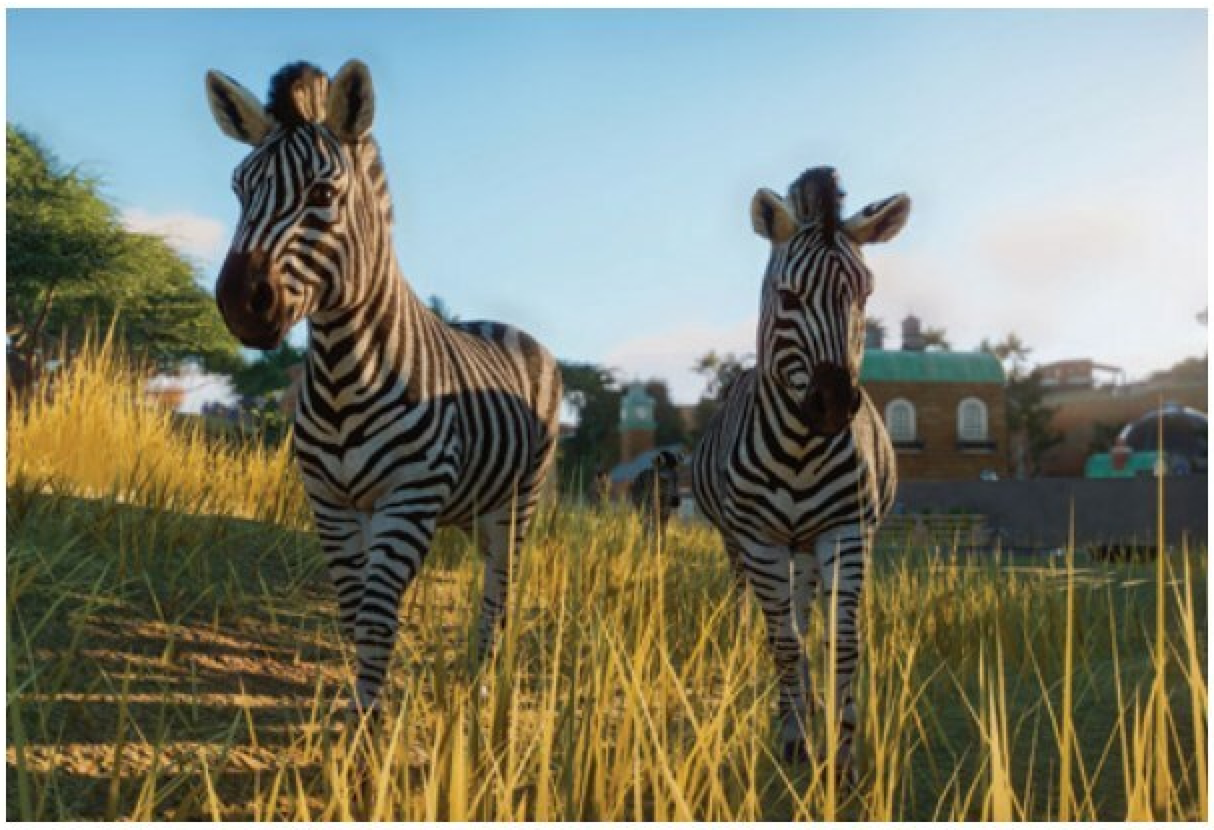
» Publisher
Frontier Developments

» Developer
Frontier Developments

» Release
Fall

In late 2016, Frontier Developments carried on the theme park management dream of Rollercoaster Tycoon to the joy of simulation fans everywhere with spiritual successor Planet Coaster. Fittingly, the developer has now turned its eye to the animal kingdom to create a spiritual successor to Zoo Tycoon called Planet Zoo. We got to take a peek behind closed doors and came away impressed by Frontier's ambitions on both a large and small scale.

The heart of Planet Zoo is unsurprisingly its animals, and they're something to behold. "We believe we've created the most authentic animals in any game," says Frontier lead designer James Taylor. "We'll follow them from birth to death, celebrating when appropriate." After a quick view of the zoo, the demo zooms down to a pack of Zebras. They look convincing and quite detailed, with Taylor explaining every Zebra will be different – from behaviors to the patterns of their stripes – depending on their genome. While every animal within a species has minor deviations in individual behavior, several of the species follow a pack mentality. Wolves have an alpha whose whims they follow, for example. I've rarely seen animals in games come off as realistic as the ones in this demonstration.



The challenge of Planet Zoo comes in how players build spaces for each animal and maintains them. Every species has different needs. Elephants and hippos, for example, need more than a shallow pond for drinking: they need a space to swim about in and clean themselves off. You need to construct a pond deep enough to accommodate that. Moreover, you need to clean that pond when it becomes dirty, lest your animals become sick, which means investing in a cleaning unit and the power generators to run it – not to mention the upkeep for all of this.

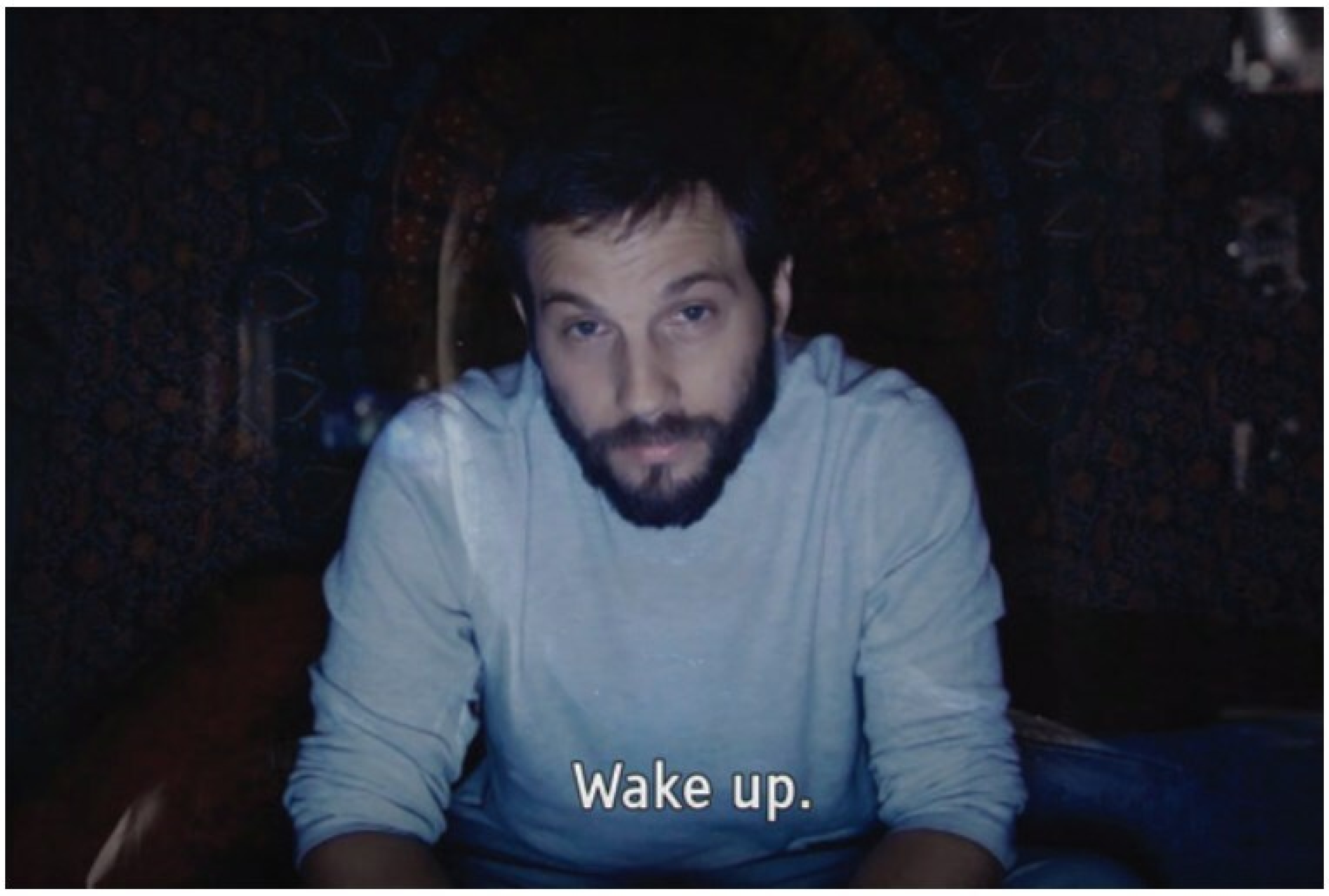
Weather changes in the real world require you to build shelters for animals to seek comfort from rain and frost. On the other hand, if your beast loves the winter and your zoo is in an arid part of the world, you must shell out for cooling pads to lay out beneath their pen. The level of management you are responsible for when it comes to caring for these animals is impressive.

As far as the theme park aspect of the zoo, we didn't get much insight into how you interact with tourists outside of theming different sections of your park, adorning buildings with tribal masks and such. Frontier plans to show off more of this aspect of the game in the short future. The developer also promised a single-player campaign (one of the few substantial criticisms levied at Planet Coaster was a lack of one) but revealed no details about the story. We asked about possible console ports, but the company is focusing completely on the PC version for the time being.

For fans of Planet Coaster or Zoo Tycoon, Planet Zoo is shaping up to be something rather special. The surprisingly realistic animal behaviors and the tools at your disposal to take care of your beasties could easily result in one of the strongest simulation titles of the year if all the elements click into place as well as they did during our demo. **» Javy Gwaltney**

Telling Lies

Four private lives exposed



Sam Barlow is no stranger to the allure of a mystery. Barlow's breakout game, Her Story, had you searching a crime database by typing in keywords to discover what really happened in a fictional case. His next game, which is not a direct sequel but rather a spiritual one, takes a similar approach. Barlow calls it "bigger, messier, and more colorful."

Telling Lies begins with a woman running into a dark apartment and pulling out a hard drive, which contains a stolen National Security Agency database with private video conversations of four people. "You get that there is some impetus for having access to all this information...that there is a larger incident, that something bad and suspenseful has gone on that colors it all," Barlow says.

This won't be a crime detective case like Her Story. Instead, Barlow is creating more of a political thriller, but it is steeped in just as much mystery. You follow four characters (see sidebar for cast) and the relationships they have with each other by searching the government database and watching their private exchanges on things like webcams. Barlow says even revealing the characters' names fall into spoiler territory, so once again it will be up to you to make the connections and have those "ah ha" moments.

Set in modern day, you must figure out why the government would take an interest in listening to these four people's conversations. "It's about privacy and how we carry out our intimate relationships with technology now," Barlow explains. The interactions you watch take place over two years, jumping around in place and time. Examining body language and subtext is key, but paying attention to how environments, such as their apartments, change at different points in time also infers a great deal.

Although technology, privacy, and the government are a big focus, Telling Lies also examines the different sides we show to different people and how honest we are in our relationships. "It's very much about how you can be in a relationship with someone and know them intimately, but the idea you have of them is never the full extent of that person," Barlow says. "There's an amount of digging to understand who these people really are and their intentions."

The gameplay captures the simplicity that made Her Story shine, but you have a lot more to digest, with around nine hours of footage to examine. You still search for words and phrases in a database to pull up clips, but Telling Lies lets you listen to entire conversations, unlike the snippets we saw in Her Story. Telling Lies' database is an improvement over Her Story's. You now have a scrub interface, which allows you to go forward and backward at different speeds to see more of the discussion and focus on specific elements. At any given time, though, you are only retrieving one side of the exchange, trying to infer what's going and how it relates to other things you've watched.

Once again, Barlow is challenging the types of stories and how we tell them in video games, focusing on adult relationships and mature themes. "This is this intensely personal story, but the subject matter also delves into a lot of political ideas," he says. "The stuff that is never out of the headlines. It's stuff you usually wouldn't see tackled in video games." Color us intrigued. » **Kimberley Wallace**

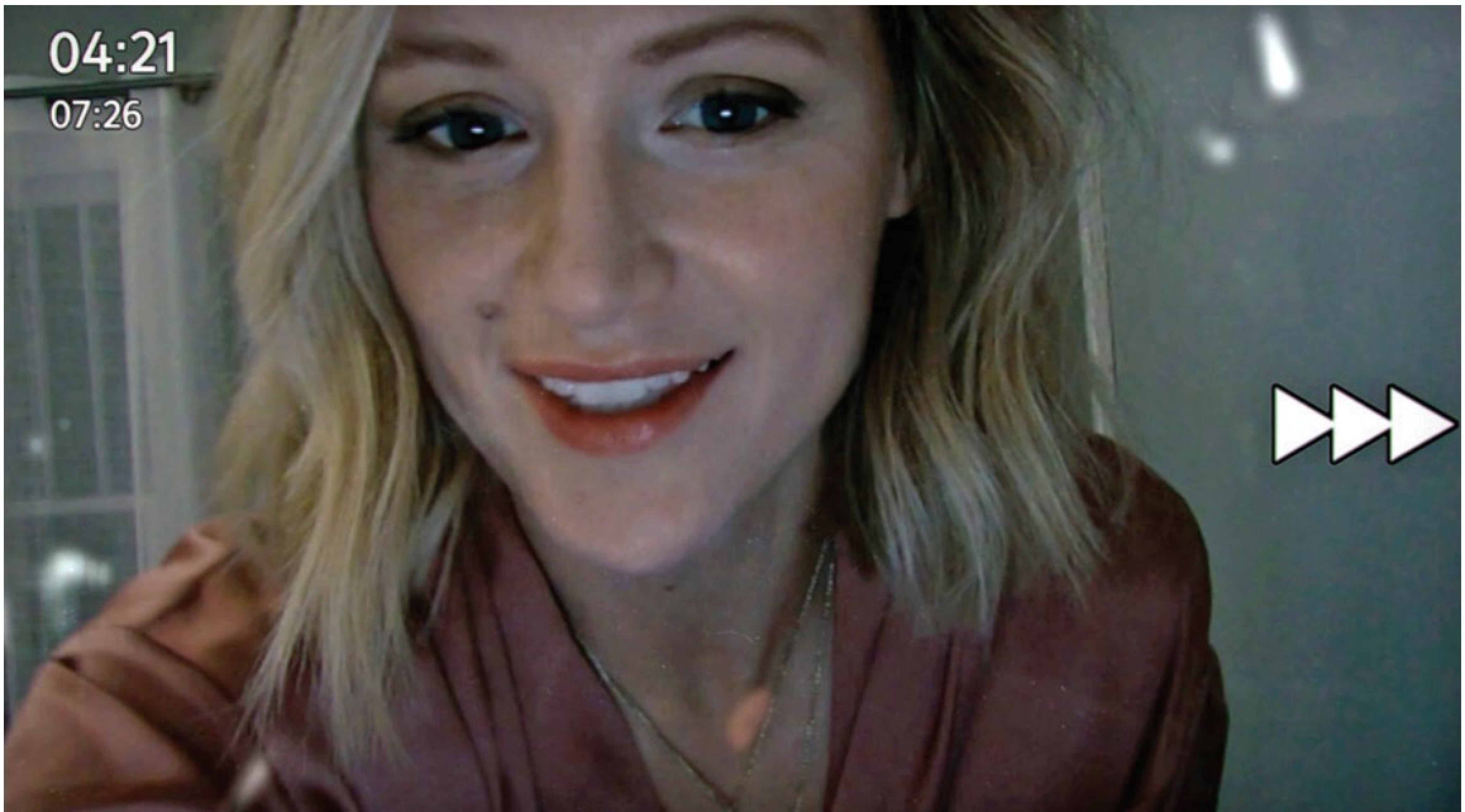
» **Platform**
PC • iOS

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Annapurna Interactive

» **Developer**
Sam Barlow,
Furious Bee Limited

» **Release**
2019



Meet The Cast

Recognize some of the faces in the screenshots? Telling Lies has some star-studded talent for its four central characters:

- Logan Marshall-Green *(Prometheus, The OC)*
- Alexandra Shipp *(X-Men: Apocalypse, Straight Outta Compton)*
- Kerry Bishé *(Halt and Catch Fire, Scrubs)*
- Angela Sarafyan *(Westworld, The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2)*

Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night

A promising dive into the spirit of Castlevania

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Platforming

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
ArtPlay, DICO,
WayForward
Technologies

» **Release**
2019

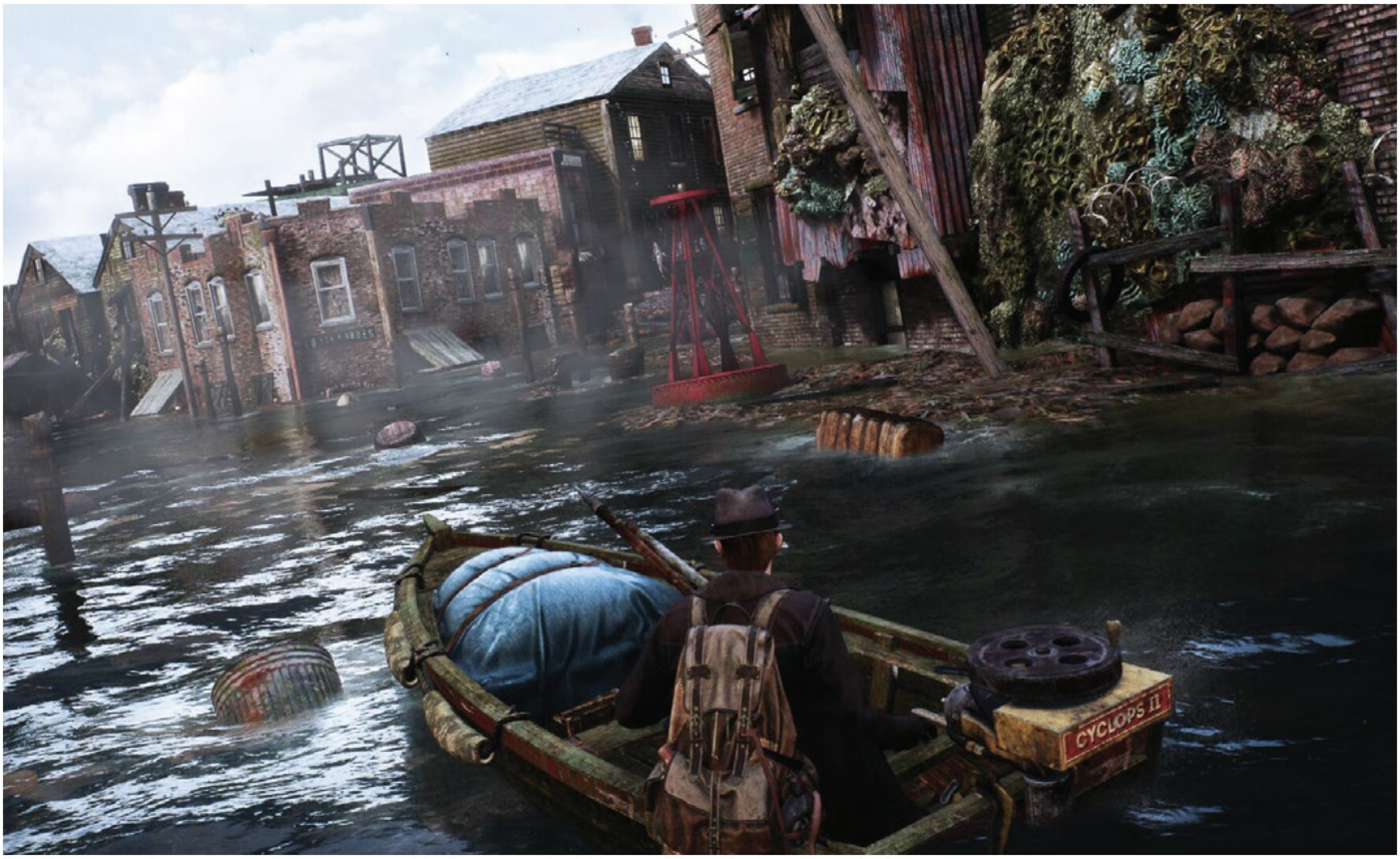
With seemingly endless development delays, demos that failed to inspire, and a constantly shifting cast of developers on the project (most recently adding WayForward games of Shantae fame to the task), Bloodstained's multiple woes have left fans rightly concerned. At PAX East, I played through a new area in the upcoming Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night on PlayStation 4 that quelled a lot of my concerns about the long development for the Kickstarter-fueled title.

Playing as protagonist Miriam, I dive right into a clock tower stage with my rapier, moving swiftly from room to room, cutting down foes and finding stashes of valuable consumables. Poison antidotes are incredibly useful, as a number of flying insect foes are quick to jab me with the affliction as I leap from cog to cog. Other rooms are filled with spooky floating portraits featuring the likeness of high-profile Kickstarter backers. The atmosphere shifts deftly between the interior locations of the tower and a long winding staircase outside, showing off the 3D potential as I carefully maneuver around the tall tower. Werewolves both big and small lurk outside, ready to test my skills and knock me around, forcing me to dip into my stash of healing potions.

The level is intricately interconnected, filled with elevators, levers, and doors that allow for fast backtracking once discovered. Consumables abound, including healing potions of different sizes to fit every situation – a quick one to quaff after a minor skirmish or a large one to down after taking on a giant werewolf. A save point room later in the level wraps back around to the entry area, allowing me to freely explore before moving on to the highlight of the experience, a big boss.

An immense twin-headed dragon reminiscent of the Twin Zombie Dragons from Castlevania: Circle of the Moon awaits at the end of the tower, and it's more difficult than anything else in the stage. Each head telegraphs movements and attacks, and learning the patterns is essential, otherwise you end up being squished betwixt them. Discovering that their weak point hangs just under their massive maws gives me an opportunity to dish out substantial damage, but I figured this out too late – the boss has a truckload of hit points – and I eventually fell victim to their two-pronged assaults.

Bloodstained has been a long time coming since its Kickstarter announcement, and not all impressions have been stellar. The clock tower build did wonders for renewing my faith in the future of the title, with a fun, colorful backdrop, great music, and creative creatures. I'm looking forward to tackling the final build when it lands later this year. » **Daniel Tack**



The Sinking City

Two hours of madness

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Bigben Interactive

» **Developer**
Frogwares

» **Release**
June 27

The tides are rising in Oakmont, Massachusetts, and along the wave-crashing shorelines emerge new horrors – some physical entities from the sea, others conjured entirely in the mind. You step into the shoes of Charles W. Reed, an investigator tasked with figuring out what is happening in this once-quaint fishing town. There's a complication, however: Before you even get the chance to step off the boat onto the city's streets, you're hit by the madness.

This is how The Sinking City begins. I spent roughly two hours playing through the opening sections of this horror adventure, and developer Frogwares didn't shy away from the H.P. Lovecraft inspirations. Tentacled beasts and bouts of uncontrollable madness hit you when you least expect them.

While I enjoyed seeing just how weird things get in Oakmont, I walked away from the opening sections of the game with mixed feelings about Reed's character development, the combat, and just how much player agency is offered.

I watched Reed descend into dark places when hallucinating, and loved the imagery that Frogwares offered in these moments, but there wasn't much in terms of character development. Even though he's seeing things and having out-of-body experiences, he's mostly a blank cipher in the opening moments, thrust immediately into case after case.

Frogwares' lengthy time making the Sherlock Holmes video games serves as the bedrock of investigative techniques players use to find out what's going on. The crimes Reed looks into are interesting since they all revolve around strange things happening in the city, missing people, and murder of course. Witches, fortunetellers, cultists, and even hybrid beings that blend fish and human anatomy walk the streets. The game embraces the freedom of movement within a sizeable play space filled with side missions, hidden items to collect or photograph, and oddly beautiful destroyed city areas to explore. As Reed tries to piece together crimes, he has chats (most of which don't offer choices) with Oakmont's people to gather leads and scour key areas for clues. As this process unfolds, he recreates crimes by using a hallucinatory sequence in which he sees ghostly figures recreate specific events, and players must piece these sequences together in the correct order. He also sees other ghostly figures of people and animals that appear to point him in the right direction to the scene of a crime.

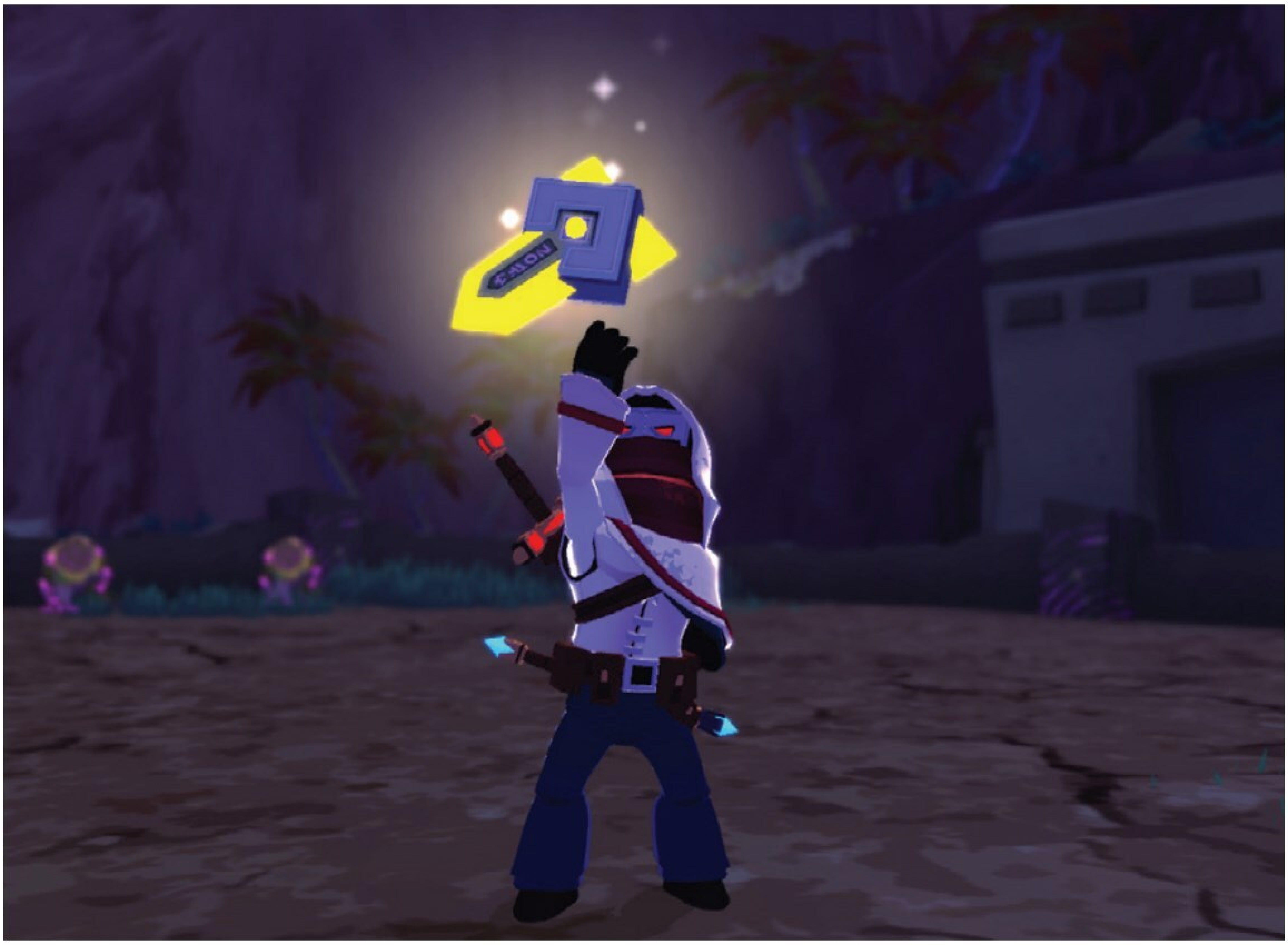
The people of Oakmont don't seem to mind their streets being occupied by dangerous creatures. Reed has a different opinion of them, and can either shoot them or whack them with a blunt object. Although Reed can craft more bullets with supplies he finds, they are are not in great abundance, and are also the currency you use to buy things. I learned quickly that I should rely on smacking these creatures as much as I could.

I don't want to spoil the outcomes of the two cases I solved, but they delivered satisfying and morbid conclusions. In the middle of one case, I had to procure diving equipment for an underwater walk to a hidden cave. It turns out you don't want to spend too much time in waters inspired by H.P. Lovecraft.

Frogwares says The Sinking City is currently in the final stages of polishing before release, and the critical path of the game offers roughly 30 hours of gameplay, not to mention a wealth of side content to dive into. I just hope that Reed develops more as a character as the madness pulls him further into the darkness. » **Andrew Reiner**

Hindsight 20/20

No easy answers



» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player
Action/Adventure

» Publisher
Triple-I Games

» Developer
Triple-I Games

» Release
2020

Avoiding the desire to optimize is difficult when playing choice-based games. We want to get the good endings, and we want to get the best loot. Should you make a choice you find interesting, or should you make a choice that benefits your character the most? Answering that question isn't always easy, but Hindsight 20/20 encourages players focus on the moment (not the reward) by blurring the lines between traditionally positive and negative outcomes.

Hindsight 20/20 is a Zelda-inspired action/adventure title from Triple-I Games, a new studio composed of former BioWare, Sucker Punch, and Arena Net developers. At first, it might not seem like an experience with much room for ambiguity. You are Jehan, a one-armed hero who can wield a blue (non-lethal) baton or a red (lethal) sword. This appears to be a classic "good or evil" setup, but the story isn't about picking one approach and sticking to it. While choosing to kill or spare your foes is a binary decision, when you do one or the other can have drastic and unpredictable consequences.

For instance, the demo I played culminates with a battle against Aurthur, the man who killed Jehan's father. The encounter has two possible forms, each with different tactics and patterns. Your moveset always consists of melee combos, special attacks, and evasion, but your weapon changes the results. If you use the baton on guards throughout the level, Aurthur recognizes your mercy, and is more reluctant and cautious during your battle. If you use the sword on guards, Aurthur is aggressive to match the hostility you've shown. Depending on the version of him you fight, you have the option to kill or spare Aurthur – but sparing isn't "good" and killing isn't "bad." They just have different impacts on the story, and whether or not the character is still in play ripples out to later events in different directions.

Not all of your choices are related to combat. When you fight Aurthur, you're trying to reach a friend in crisis. If that boss fight takes too long (and it probably will on your first try), your friend takes his own life. But if you defeat Aurthur quickly, you have a chance to talk your friend down … though he may still die. Whatever happens, Hindsight 20/20 tracks these variables and many others, storing them so characters and story events can react to them later. A decision that seems right in the moment, like saving a friend, might still end in tragedy much later. But in real life, people don't always know the consequences of their actions, and they can only do their best in the moment; as the game's name implies, that's one of the central themes of Hindsight 20/20.

Triple-I expects a single playthrough to take about six hours. But with so many permutations of the story and multiple non-overlapping endings, the team hopes players will jump in again to see the many ways scenarios can unfold. The future always holds uncertainty, but Hindsight 20/20's accessible combat, stylized visuals, and complex conundrums give it plenty of potential.

» **Joe Juba**

Warsaw

All things must end

» Platform
PS4 • Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

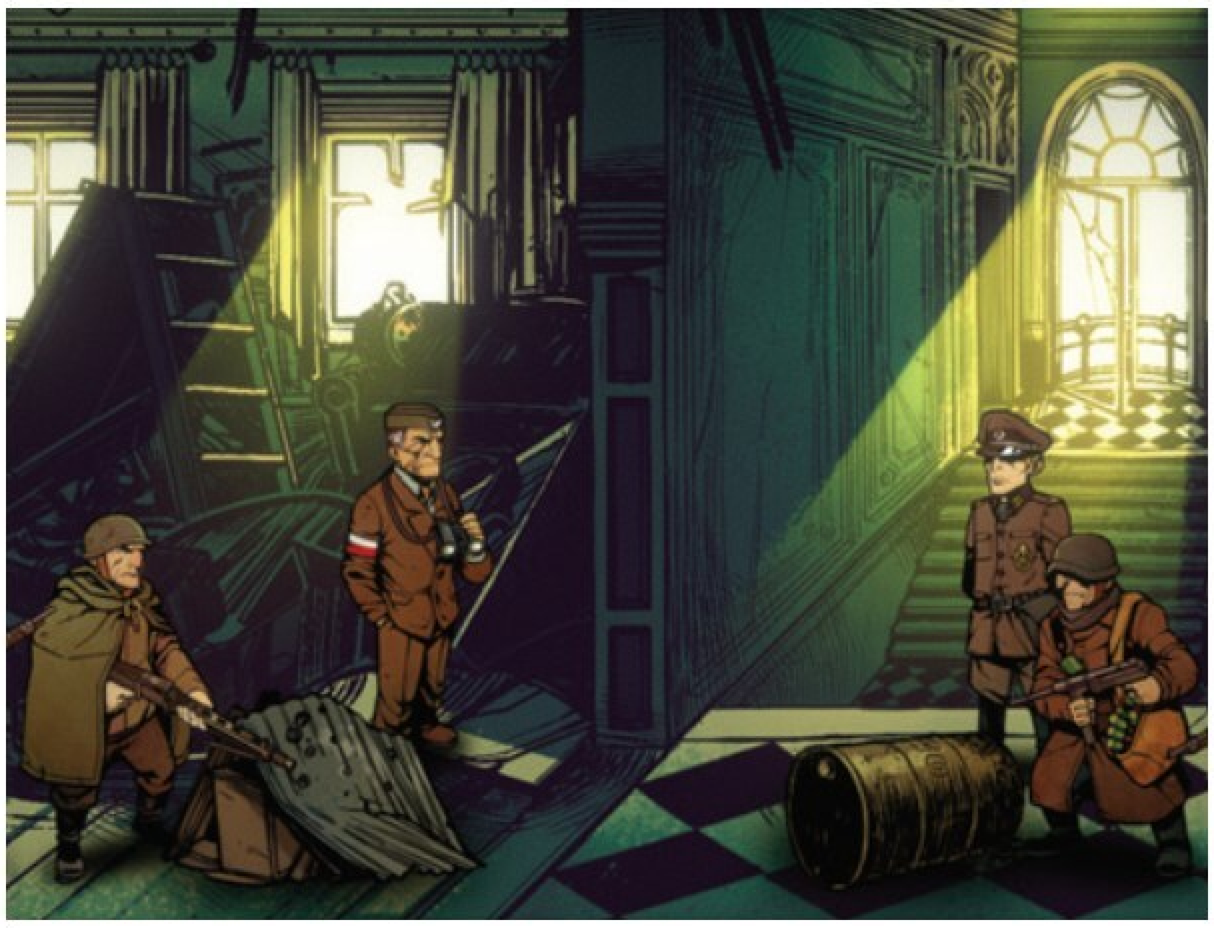
» Publisher
Gaming Company Ltd

» Developer
Pixelated Milk

» Release
Fall

In the summer of 1944, the Polish underground resistance initiated a coordinated push against the collapsing German Third Reich. This uprising became the largest military effort by a European resistance movement during the entire war. For much of the war, Poland had been in the heart of the storm, and its people were eager for freedom, but their rebellion would extract a heavy toll.

"It is both a very tragic and a very contentious event in Polish history, with consequences stretching as far as to today," says writer and designer Jędrzej Łojewski. "We thought it would be a worthy effort to attempt to somehow reflect both of these qualities in our game … It is a game about the bleakness, ambiguity, and pointlessness of war. Much like how it happened with the real life Warsaw Uprising, the game does not allow for victory – instead, it is meant to be a reflection of the Uprising's slow descent into doom."



In Warsaw, defeat is inevitable, but players influence when and how they meet their eventually end. If you are able to outthink the Germans, you might ensure that your trusted heroes survive the bloody battles and find sanctuary until the end of the war. However, that requires careful resource management. The city is divided into districts, and each district burns through its own set of supplies each day. In order to extend your resistance movement, you must collect and allocate new resources to each district. If you fail to meet your daily quotas, the uprising's momentum falters, bringing you closer to the end.

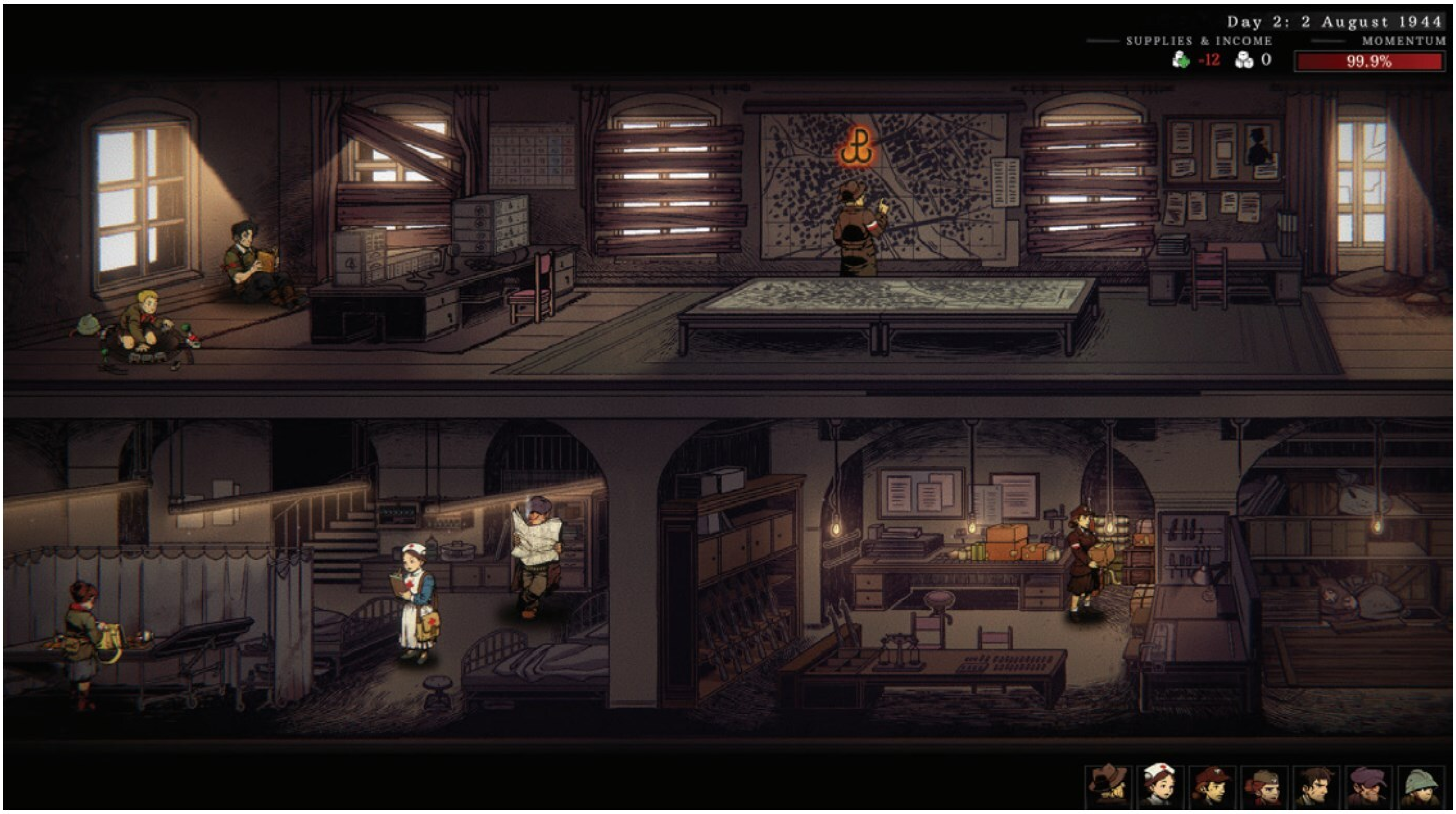
Every day, you gain new supplies by running missions throughout the city. Your German occupiers aren't happy with scavengers and readily attack on sight. These firefights play out in a series of strategic turn-based battles where you manage your squads' placement on a 4x2 grid. Similar to Darkest Dungeon, some attacks can only be initiated from specific points on the battlefield, and you do more damage to enemies on opposing rows, which gives Warsaw's battles a tactical component.

Every combatant can equip a unique combination of weapons, and each weapon opens up new skills that layers onto your heroes existing skills. You acquire these weapons from underground arms dealers, but they come with a price, since you have to sacrifice the supplies your resistance lives on in order to obtain the best gear. Finding the right balance of resources is key to sustaining your uprising.

"All characters fall into classic archetypes, such as the damage-dealer, support, and so on," Łojewski says. "The scout excels at controlling stamina levels and removing negative effects, while the Officer's forte is repositioning the party and buffing properly placed characters. Both the sharpshooter and the home-army soldier are damage-dealers, but while the sharpshooter focuses on instant elimination of rank-and-file enemies, the home-army soldier possesses abilities themed around retaliation."

The Warsaw Uprising was a grim chapter in WWII, and Pixelated Milk doesn't aim to sugarcoat history. During Warsaw's epic battle for survival, players are bound to lose beloved party members as they experience the uncaring ravages of war.

» Ben Reeves



Journey To The Savage Planet

A pulpy planet of adventure

Spacefaring players have no shortage of sci-fi themed exploration experiences to choose from these days, ranging the gamut from resource-intensive collect-a-thons like No Man's Sky to hardcore simulations like Elite Dangerous. The developers at Typhoon Studios are using their collective experiences working on high-profile franchises like Far Cry and the Batman Arkham games to distill this concept into a charming, smaller-scale experience.

Journey to the Savage Planet doesn't throw you into a universe of possibilities, choosing instead to focus your exploration on one planet in the middle of uncharted space. As an employee of Kindred Aerospace – which proudly proclaims itself the fourth-best space-exploration outfit – you leverage your character's botany and cartography skills to explore and catalog the life on a planet supposedly devoid of intelligent life and deemed habitable by the higher-ups at Kindred. When you first step out of your landing craft and look upward, the monolithic tower extending high into the sky suggests that maybe Kindred got the fourth-best intelligence on this planet – someone has already been here.

Finding a way into the tower is the main objective, but how you get there is largely left up to the player. Creative director and Typhoon co-founder Alex Hutchinson describes the game as what would happen if "Metroidvania met Subnautica and had a love affair with Far Cry." As you explore the world, scanning its flora and fauna and collecting various resources to upgrade your equipment, the world offers several solutions for its environmental and platforming puzzles. Maybe you use your jet pack to circumvent a series of vines impeding your progress or study the nearby creatures to discover that throwing one of them into a mouth-like vortex next to the vines grants passage.

Venturing onto a new planet without a weapon sounds like a death sentence, so your pioneer is equipped with a pistol for when things get rough. Most enemies keep to themselves unless provoked, but Typhoon has also created some combat challenges for those who prefer to shoot first, ask questions later. An active reload system and overclocking system give your pistol some dynamism, and you can upgrade it over the course of the 10-to-12-hour game to make it more formidable. If you'd prefer to keep your weapon holstered, Hutchinson says the studio wants to service your playstyle as well. "As a former Maxis employee I have a great fondness for non-violent paths through games, and we're trying very hard to make a path through where if you work at it you can avoid all the combat in the game," Hutchinson says. "We haven't gotten there yet, but you can avoid most of it."

Meant to be a lighthearted, humorous take on space exploration, Journey to the Savage Planet leans into its pulpy sensibilities – seeing the *Mystery Science Theater 3000* crew overlaid on top of the action wouldn't feel out of place. The live-action messages from the Kindred CEO that play in your home base over the course of your missions recall the *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* Each of the creatures we've seen are weird, as are the items you equip in your non-shooting hand. You can eat the futuristic food substitute Grob to replenish your health, or you could toss it to lure creatures around the environment.

Journey to the Savage Planet's carefree sense of humor and inviting world make it one to keep an eye on. "It's meant to be something you play alongside your endless space wizard game like an aperitif, an *amuse-bouche* on the side," Hutchinson says. "We're hoping the humor resonates, we're hoping it's something different in the marketplace that's familiar in terms of mechanics that's easy to pick up and play." » **Matt Bertz**

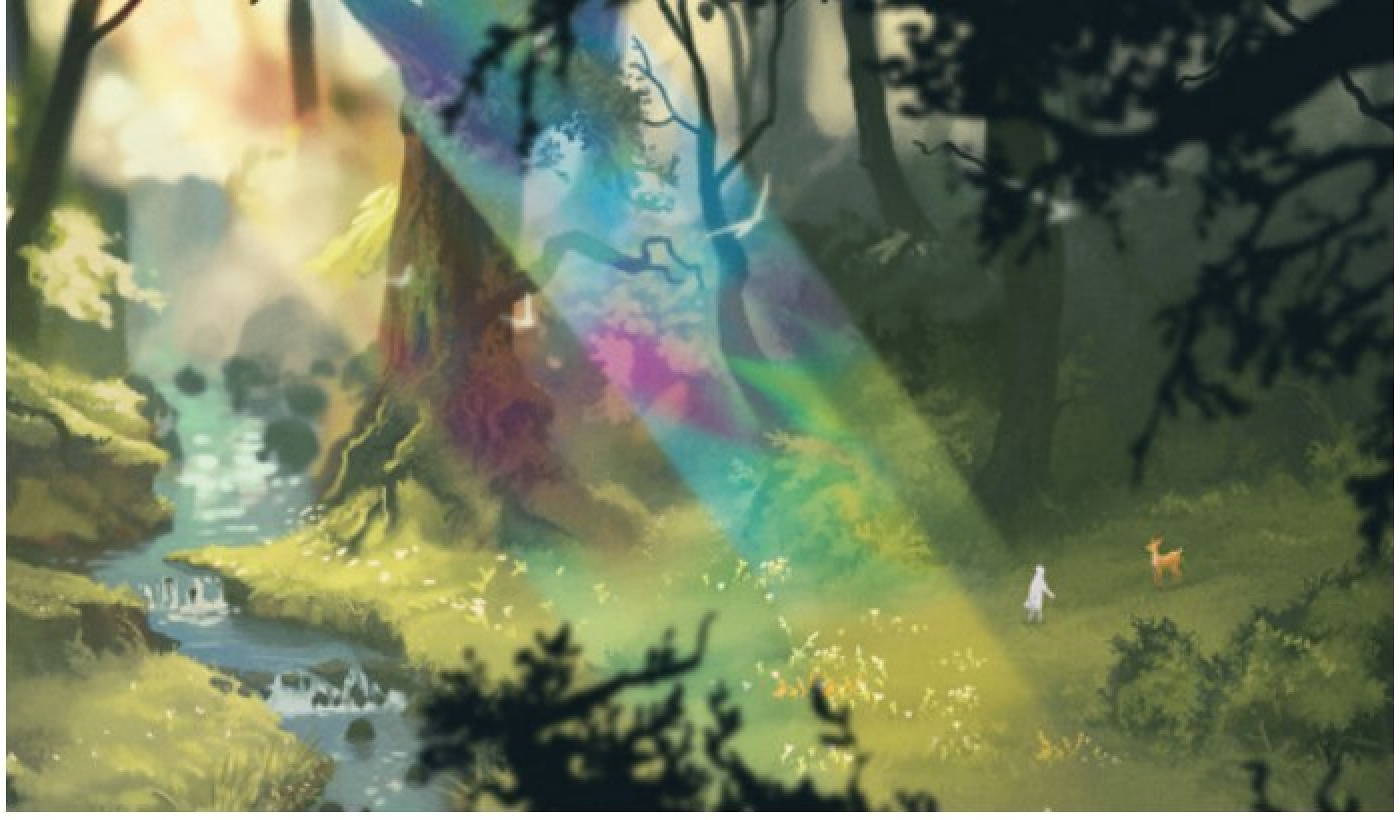
» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

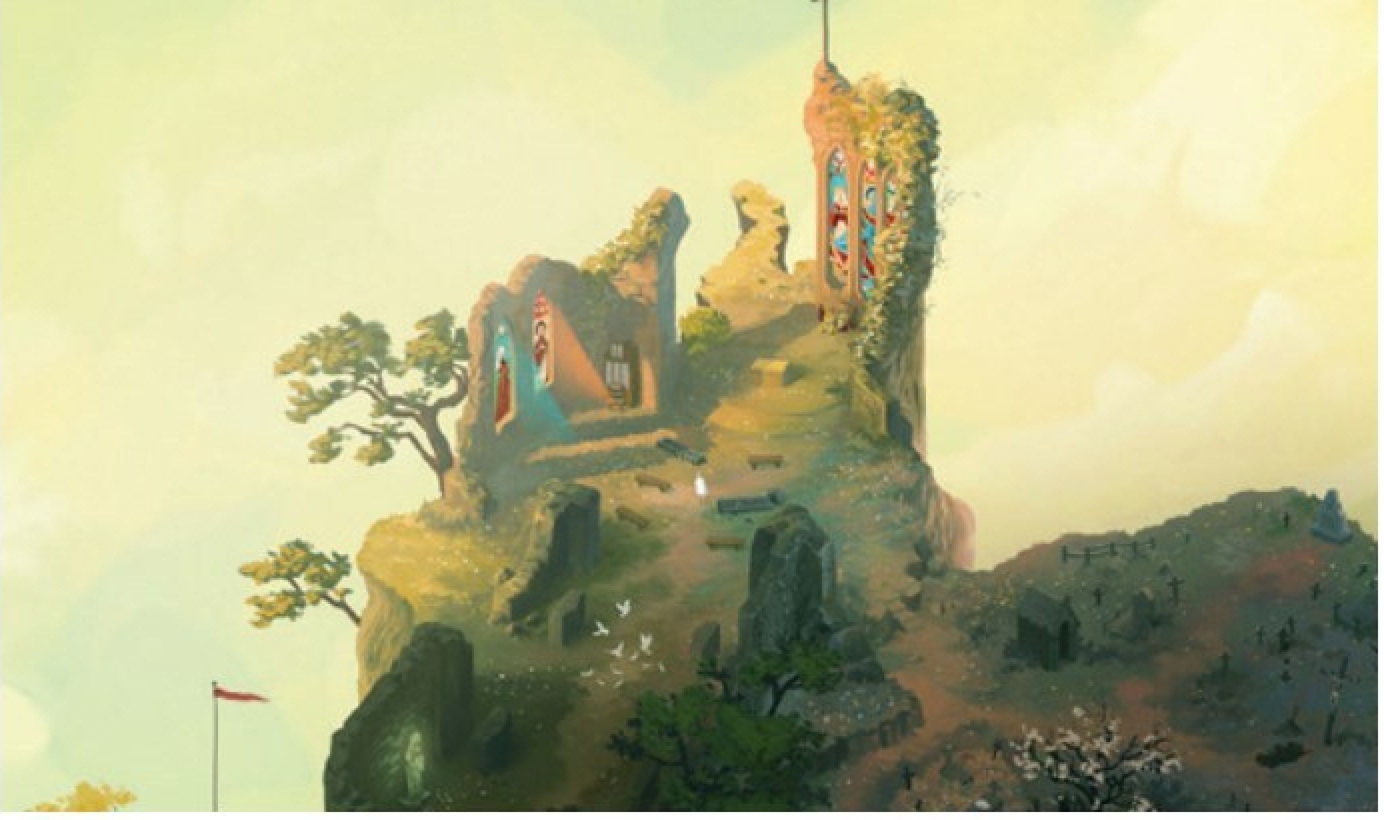
» Style
1-Player
Action/Adventure

» Publisher
505 Games

» Developer
Typhoon Studios

» Release
2020





The Wanderer: Frankenstein's Creature

A beautiful and tragic journey from the creature's eyes

» **Platform**
Switch • PC • iOS
» **Style**
1-Player Adventure
» **Publisher**
Arte
» **Developer**
La Belle Games
» **Release**
Fall

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* remains a beloved and important piece of literature, spurring numerous retellings and continuations. Its presence in popular culture is undeniable, and perhaps it's fitting that the story is making its way to a video game. The Wanderer: Frankenstein's Creature is a tribute to Shelley, allowing you to step into the role of the iconic "creature" and craft your own version of the gothic classic.

The Wanderer: Frankenstein's Creature is a beautiful and emotional fusion of art and music. You start as a blank slate, neither good or evil, and your actions shape who the creature becomes and literally color the adventure. Every step you take expands the world around you and how you interact with it floods the scenery with your emotions. For instance, drink water from a stream and a rainbow appears, but eat the carcass of a deer and dark music and colors appear. You are taking your first steps into this world and learning about it, with the brain of a child trapped in a monster's body. This is an exploration of what it means to be human, and the game focuses on our different senses, such as sight and sound, to convey that.

The Wanderer: Frankenstein's Creature tackles many themes, from society to religion, just like Shelley's novel. In my demo, I saw everything from the cruelness of humanity to the feelings of isolation and loneliness from being different. This all climaxes in a scene where you start playing with children and having fun only to have the adults chase you out of the village, throwing rocks at you. The intense visuals and atmospheric soundtrack make these situations even more emotional, providing a unique experience for not only the subject matter but also for its artistic nature. » **Kimberley Wallace**

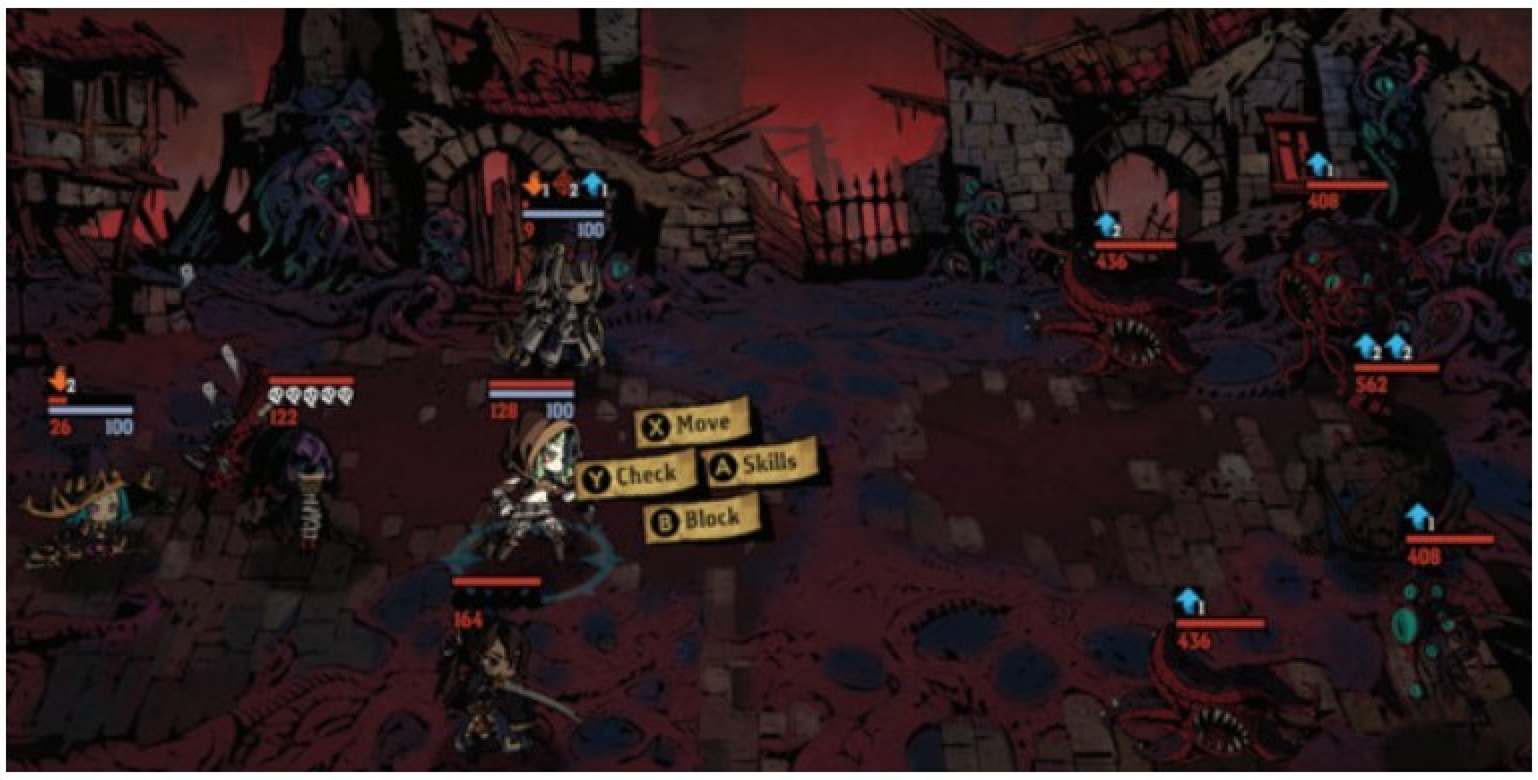
Mistover

Shifting stages and anime style

» **Platform**
Switch • PC
» **Style**
1-Player
Role-Playing
» **Publisher**
Krafton
» **Developer**
Krafton
» **Release**
Summer

If you took Darkest Dungeon, wrapped it up in an anime burrito, and added some overworld map-crawling condiments, you'd essentially have Mistover. With an ever-changing (and ever-dying) band of adventurers ranging from berserkers to grim reapers, you must head into castles, cathedrals, and forests, picking your battles carefully along the way in the hopes of surviving and growing stronger.

Mistover tasks you with creating a crew to take into the apocalyptic Pillar of Despair, a vortex filled with dangerous and altering mist, as well as rare bastions of light. The overworld map lets you scour for food, keys, chests, and more. You can hide in bushes as giant, deadly enemies pass by, or attempt to engage everything directly. The choice is yours, though discretion may prove to be the better part of valor. Picking your battles is important as your crew faces the sting of permadeath, but you can always recruit more adventurers.



Combat is turn-based, stylish fare where moves are locked in and played out with dramatic effect. Most abilities your characters use come with some kind of trade-off, forcing you to constantly weigh your options. The berserker may be able to dish out a heavy attack that's likely to crit, but the exertion might debuff them afterward. Risk/reward balancing is around every decision, and selecting the right tool for the job is a constant conundrum that hangs over every battle.

The mist plays an important factor in exploration, and provides massive variance from adventure to adventure. The warping wafts of the mist can provide your characters new and strange abilities, mutate monsters with deadly consequences, or corrupt your once-safe supply stashes.

Mistover is scheduled to hit this summer on both Switch and PC, and I'm looking forward to coming up with different party compositions and attempting to stay alive when it arrives. » **Daniel Tack**

Levelhead

Under construction

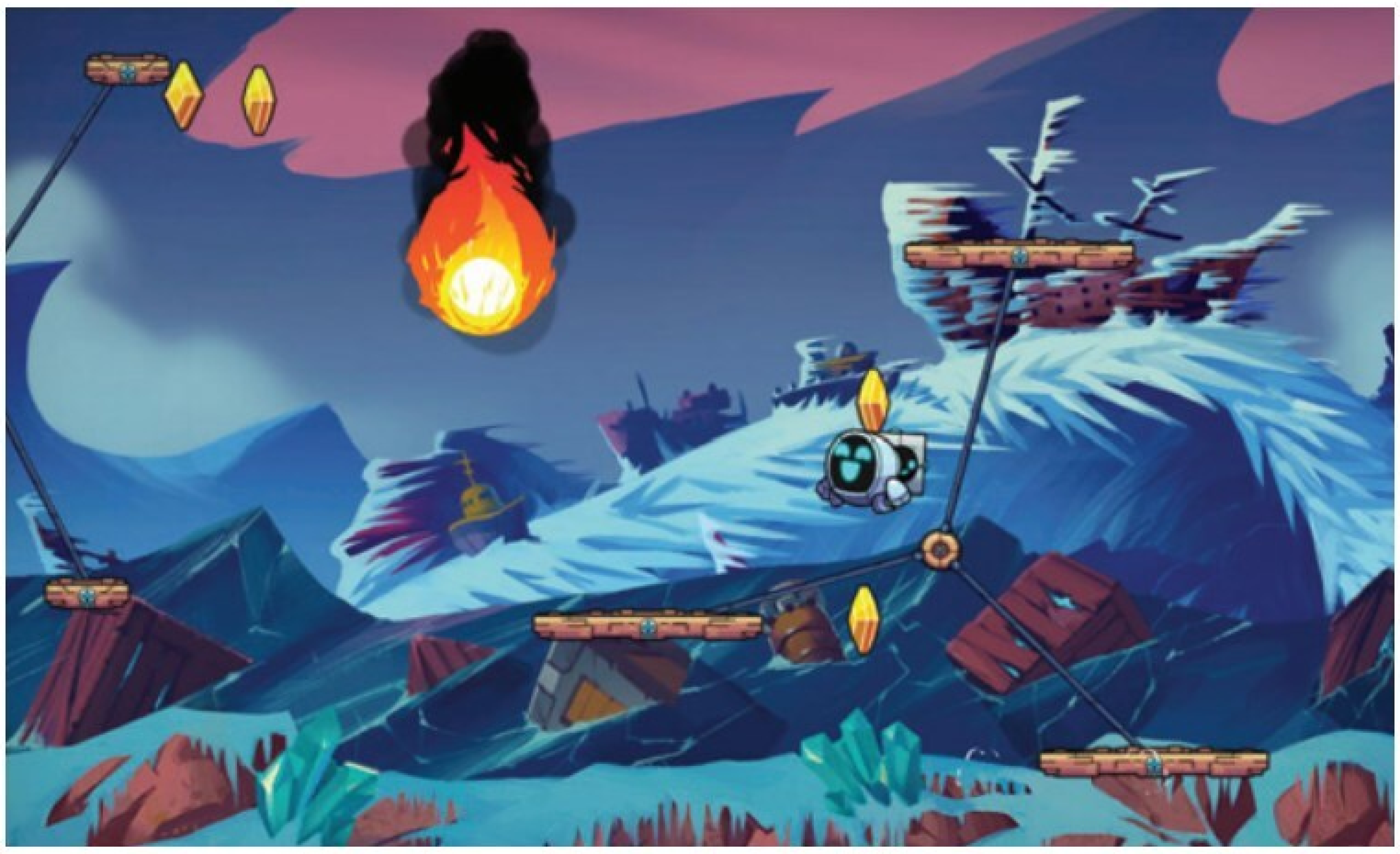
The team of brothers behind crafting-adventure Crashlands is back with a package-delivery platformer that allows for cooperative play and level creation. Levelhead welcomes you as the newest employee of the Bureau of Shipping by giving you your own GR-18 delivery robot. Your first task is to train your robot by guiding it through various 2D platforming levels.

Since you're training a delivery robot, you must ensure the robot and package both reach the end goal. As you progress through the campaign, you come across several new components that challenge your platforming mettle, including different enemies, pressure switches, one-way tiles, and fireballs that rotate around blocks. This adds new challenges, but also allows you to unlock those new components in the robust level creation suite.

The Workshop lets you flex your creative muscles and create the levels of your dreams. Taking cues from games like Super Mario Maker, Levelhead's create-a-level tools are tile-based, allowing you to easily transpose the designs in your head to the game. The tools give you control of everything from backgrounds and enemy placement to weather and secret areas.

Once you create your level, you can share it online and track stats like playtime and number of attempts. While you can search for a specific level or creator, popular stages are surfaced in a separate section, saving you the time of wading through lesser levels to find the diamonds.

With a curated campaign from the developers, plus potentially thousands of user-generated levels, Levelhead hopes to provide platforming fans with hours of content to explore. I enjoyed what I played and am looking forward to seeing how the community embraces the toolset. » **Brian Shea**



» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Butterscotch Shenanigans

» **Developer**
Butterscotch Shenanigans

» **Release**
April 18 (Early Access)

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reviews
MLB 150

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

89 MLB The Show 19

After a down year, MLB The Show 19 redeems the series with redesigned modes and new avenues of play. Historic moments help Diamond Dynasty find a new pulse, and being able to define who you are in Road to the Show creates a more dynamic path to the Majors.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Motorcycle-themed wedding vows.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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MORTAL 11 KOMBAT
MK
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XBOX ONE X NETHERREALM WB GAMES

Vacation Simulator

A modest virtual sabbatical

7.25

Rift • Vive

» **Concept**
Explore a trio of vacation destinations and solve puzzles for a series of robots in order to relax at maximum efficiency

» **Graphics**
The environments are colorful and feel like they're made of plastic, which helps sell the idea that you are in a computer-created simulation

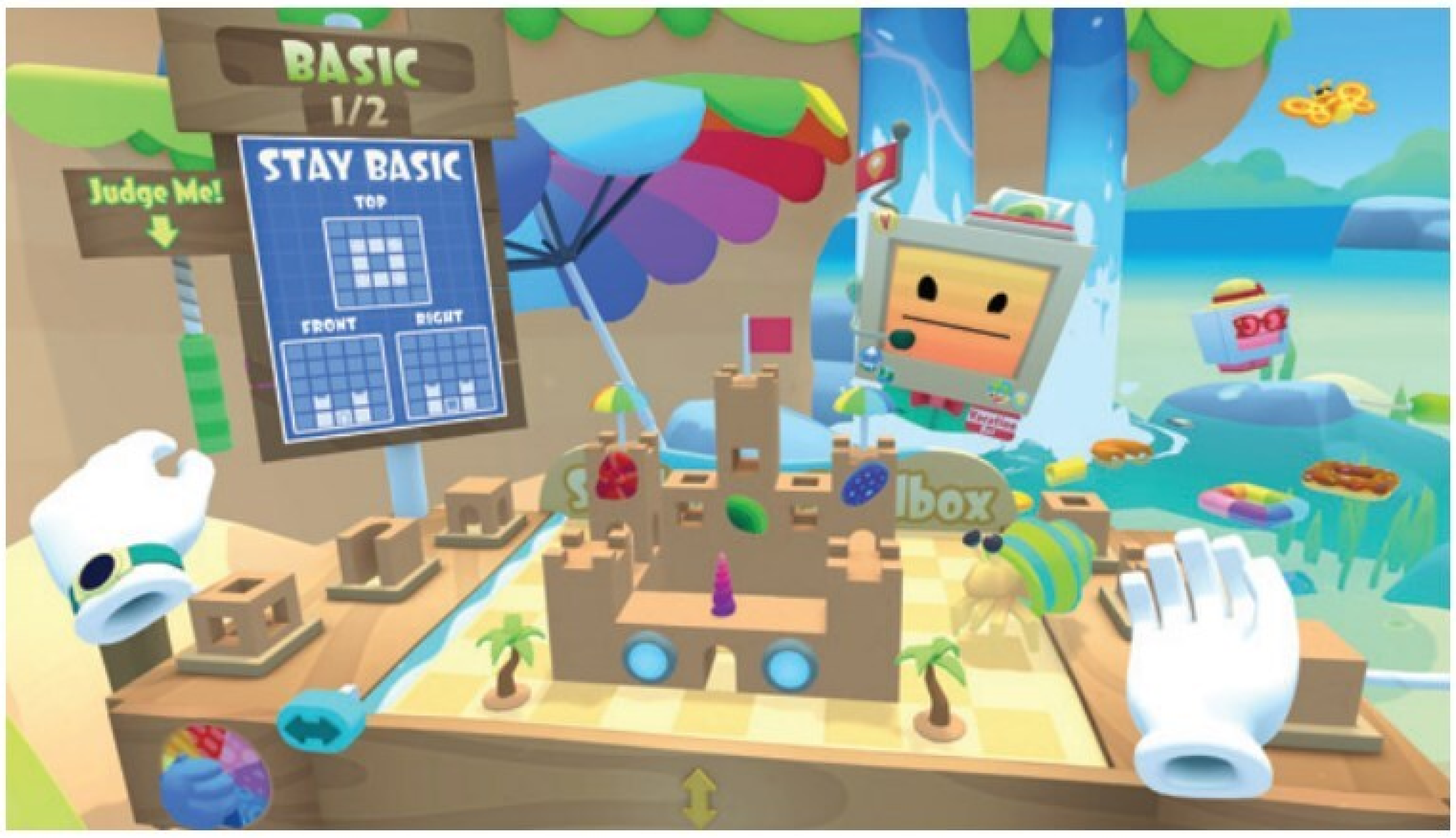
» **Sound**
The music is light, subtle, and ultimately forgettable (except for the final song). Some of the robots' voices are better performed than others

» **Playability**
I struggled occasionally to grab things out of reach, but moving through the world and interacting with all of its elements is easy overall

» **Entertainment**
Going on vacation is an expectedly relaxing experience that doesn't demand much from the player, which makes Vacation Simulator play like an introductory VR experience

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Owlchemy Labs **Developer** Owlchemy Labs **Release** April 9 **Rating** E10+



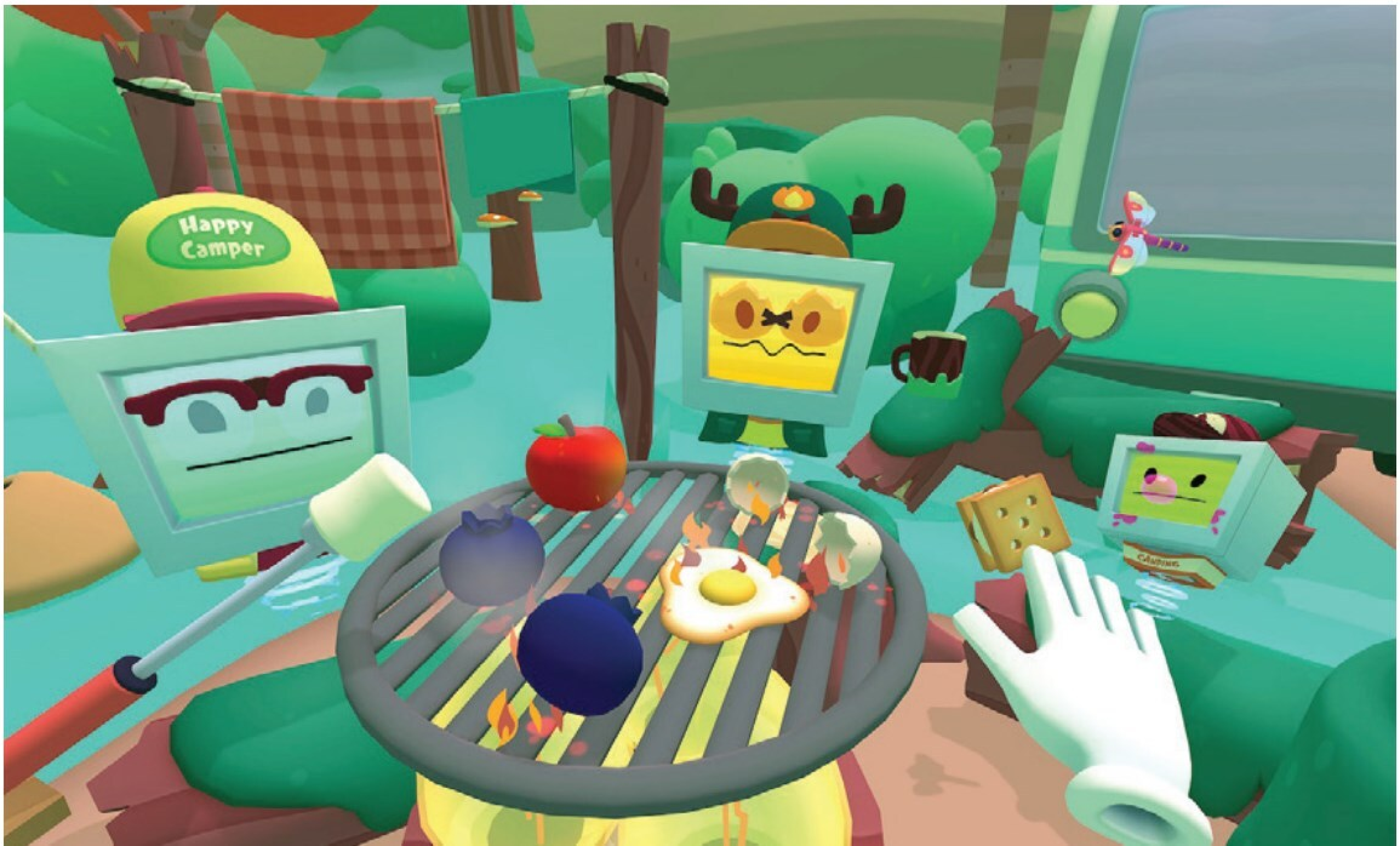
Owlchemy Labs' first VR game, Job Simulator, placed you in a series of familiar work environments and made you interact with well-meaning robots who didn't understand how human beings work. Vacation Simulator is the natural evolution of that experience, trading the office for vacation settings while keeping the friendly-but-confused robots. You have more to do and are a more active participant in the simulation this time around, but it still feels like an experience best-suited to VR newcomers, which can be good and bad.

In Vacation Simulator, the polite robots present you with a beach, a forest, and a mountain to explore in the interest of enjoying the most efficient vacation possible. Within each of these locations, you can teleport to assorted locations, interact with various robots, and do tasks for them to create and collect memories, which you need in order to see the game's conclusion. The setup gives you diverse places to explore as you chat up the humorous robots. I never got bored, as the areas are diverse and they're all open to you right from the start.

The destinations all have variations on the same set of puzzles and each has a handful of exclusives. One robot wants photos of specific locations or items, another wants to play volleyball, and at least one robot always wants you to collect something and bring it to them. The puzzles are simple, but they facilitate your interaction with the environment. I particularly liked cooking and creating food and delivering it to the robot that requested it. Turning on the grill, opening the fridge to grab a burger patty, tossing it on the grill to cook, and then placing it on a bun is just a satisfying experience in VR, and it works well.

The robots have the occasional funny line as they struggle to emulate humanity, but most of my interactions were just listening to what the robots needed from me, which is disappointing. The story features a pair of robots arguing about making the most efficient vacation versus having fun for the sake of it, which reflected my own back-and-forth feelings about the game. When trying to be efficient and complete as much as possible, Vacation Simulator is tedious thanks to repeated simple puzzles, but when I was just goofing off and interacting with the environment to see what happens when I place a can of soda in a waffle iron, for example, I had a better time. The latter experience is familiar, just as the early VR games were not much more than rooms filled with objects to interact with. In that sense, Vacation Simulator isn't much of a follow-up, since the gameplay hasn't evolved.

Walking around Vacation Simulator's locations and carrying items between them to solve its various puzzles is where I had the most fun. The robots have a good sense of humor even if they're not hilarious, but the overall experience relies too much on how much entertainment you can wring out of moving physics objects in a VR environment. » **Kyle Hilliard**



Dangerous Driving

Not all collisions are a hit

Style 1-Player Action (Online TBA) **Publisher** Three Fields Entertainment **Developer** Three Fields Entertainment **Release** April 9 **Rating** E10+

Two of Dangerous Driving's fundamental tenets – racing and crashing – are at odds with each other. The game has both in equal measure, and they're enjoyable at times. However, they don't complement each other to elevate the game to more than what it is on paper: a racing title in which you occasionally marvel at some mangled crashes.

Dangerous Driving is composed of various race types unlocked more-or-less linearly based on your car class (SUV, supercar, formula DD, etc.). The majority of events revolve around racing, whether that's trying to chain boosts together in Heatwave, going against a single competitor in Face Off, or seeing how far you can get before you crash in Survival. Of course, even if you're not more focused on knocking out people, like when you're a cop in Pursuit mode, crashing into others is always an option.

I chuckled at nailing traffic head-on at high speeds, and watching flaming cars flip and crumple. Dangerous Driving definitely has these moments, but it isn't integrated with the racing in a way to make these crashes more than worth a few laughs. I was often annoyed – even when I sent another car tumbling – because the slow-motion crash interludes took me out of the racing zone. Sometimes you can't even tell if it's you or them being smashed. Taking someone out is also disorientating; the race continues in real-time, so you're suddenly somewhere else on the track than when the hit was first initiated.

After a while, the spectacle of the crashes are less impressive. They give the car more boost, but because this is easy to achieve in other ways like getting air, drifting, or avoiding pile ups, the crashing itself often isn't necessary. Your competitors are back on the track in no time in the race-orientated modes anyway (multiplayer is planned for after launch), so other than on the last lap or home stretch, it is not ultimately useful. At least later in the game crashes are made slightly more interesting when some events have specific takedown rules, like an opponent must be rubbed out using the A.I. traffic. These stipulations make it harder to get a takedown, but don't make the crashes more meaningful.

Apart from the oncoming A.I. cars, the environments don't augment the mayhem. The tracks contain different background scenery, but their assembly of curves and straightaways don't distinguish themselves from one another. Similarly, car selection isn't a big deal since the events are tied to each vehicle class, and although you can pick four different variations of each car class, they are specifically suited for a particular race mode (like Tuned vehicles being best for Heatwave races), so there's not a lot of strategy involved.

Dangerous Driving has some hiccups like momentary pauses in tunnels, rare unexpected car swerves (both yours and the A.I.), slowdown, and inconsistent crash determinations, but these aren't even why the game misses its target. Previous Three Fields titles like the Danger Zone series and Dangerous Golf had a reason for their destruction, but I can't find it in Dangerous Driving. The racing itself has some thrills due to its sometimes insane sense of speed, but neither it nor the crashes make their mark. » **Matthew Kato**

6

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Race towards the finish line or into your opponents depending on the race mode

» Graphics
The sense of speed is good, but the framerate occasionally slows down or pauses

» Sound
Unlike other Three Fields titles, Dangerous Driving doesn't have a lot of fun sounds to pick out in amid the destruction

» Playability
The controls are simple and the difficulty ramp-up isn't too steep

» Entertainment
Neither the racing nor the crashes do enough to make this title stand out

» Replay Value
Moderate

Mortal Kombat 11

A disgusting delight

8

Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment **Developer** NetherRealm Studios **Release** April 23 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One Switch • PC

» Concept
The past and present unite to create one of the deepest and most satisfying Mortal Kombat experiences to date

» Graphics
We used to gawk at the blood and gore, but Mortal Kombat 11's eye-stealing qualities are the detailed facial animations and colorful backdrops

» Sound
Ronda Rousey doesn't click as Sonya Blade, but most of the voice work is solid or appropriately campy. The sounds of violence and agony may also be a little too good

» Playability
Signature Mortal Kombat special moves and combos with customizable move sets and plenty of challenges to complete. The flow of combat is fantastic. Easily the best playing in the series

» Entertainment
Most of the content is amazing and fun, but the loot issues and microtransactions come close to being a self-inflicted Fatality for NetherRealm

» Replay Value
High

In each new Mortal Kombat installment, we look on in horror as combatants are dismembered, mutilated, and devoured in disturbing and comedic ways. Even when their bodies are reduced to unrecognizable heaps of flesh and bone, most of these characters find ways to bounce back into fighting form for a sequel, making it seem like the war between realms will never end.

Mortal Kombat 11 repeats this bloody dance, and is even more ridiculous in its narrative setup than previous entries. A new character named Kronika is messing with the timestream and wants to rewrite history, so characters don't just kill their enemies – they also kill the past versions of their enemies. The champions of each realm are divided; good guys turn bad, bad guys stay bad but unite with their past selves to do even more ambitious bad things, and all kinds of glorious chaos erupts.

This time-traveling narrative is sharply written, offering a number of clever era-specific jokes, and also slows down to have heartfelt moments, and I'm not just speaking about a freshly squeezed heart beating in someone's hand (although that does happen). This dramatic tale is huge in scale, powerful in its surprising twists, and appears to be written with the words "The End" in mind. This story delivers a legitimate conclusion to the saga.

The concept of retreating to the past dovetails into the combat. Plenty of modern ideas are woven into it, like customizable move sets and gear to level up, but the flow of the battle hits more of a classic Mortal Kombat tone. Characters generally move faster than they did in Mortal Kombat X, but the removal of the run button results in a slower and more nuanced fray. Creating combos and managing space are still at the heart of combat, but new offensive and defensive meters offer up strategic choices mid-fight, such as cashing in energy to amplify a special move. Using Crushing Blows to increase damage based on meeting certain conditions is another strategic layer. If you're on the verge of death, a powerful last gasp comes in the form of the ridiculously violent Fatal Blow (replacing the X-Ray move), which chips away at your enemy's health as their body is shredded. The Fatal Blows are a little too long, but increase the tension and give you a shot at a match that may not have started well.

The combat absolutely hums, and NetherRealm does a fantastic job of communicating every facet of it through extensive tutorials. The idea of spending time in tutorials may not sound fun, but they are well crafted and break down everything from frame data (how long it takes to start a move) to character-specific lessons (like teaching you how to master Scorpion's Hell Port). Spending 15 minutes in them for your character of choice will help you immensely, especially in figuring out which moves you bring into battle. Being able to customize your move set is an awesome addition that gives you ownership over your characters.

Finish a tutorial and you may get a new costume for that character. Complete a Tower of Time and you could be showered with coins, consumables, and augments. Players are rewarded for almost every action they make in Mortal Kombat 11, but the gathering of goods isn't satisfying most of the time. The vast array of unlockables ends up being a problem considering how low the odds are of getting what you want. Most rewards are hidden in chests that offer a random selection of stuff.

The chests you open are all located in the Krypt, a sprawling maze you explore from the third-person perspective. Just navigating the Krypt can be confusing, but you encounter a number of interesting (albeit simple) puzzles along the way, and I love the nostalgic trappings (like Goro's Lair, complete with the corpse of the big guy). The Krypt is a fun little game in itself, pushing you to hunt down items to progress.

You have no easy paths to the loot you want, unless those items show up in the premium store. This marketplace uses its own currency type that is doled out in minimal quantities, but (you guessed it) can be obtained in bulk with real money. The entire loot system has a disgusting feel to it, which is a shame because the combat and variety of challenges in the Towers or Time are damn good. The Towers of Time embrace more of an old-school design (in showing you exactly what you'll be rewarded most of the time), and deliver rotating challenges over the course of a day. You just have to move quickly to get what you want before the Tower disappears.

Mortal Kombat 11 may have loot issues, but the combat has never been more rewarding. You can finish the entertaining story mode in one sitting, but getting the gear for the character you want could end up being more of a time-stealing tale than the one the game tells. » **Andrew Reiner**

The Walking Dead: The Final Season

A goodbye full of highs and lows

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Telltale Games, Skybound Games
Developer Telltale Games, Skybound Games **Release** March 27 **Rating** M

7

Goodbyes are never easy, especially when you've spent the last seven years invested in a character. The feeling is compounded when you're experiencing the last product by the studio that created her; The Walking Dead put Telltale Games on the map with its focus on emotional storytelling and player choice, but it all came crashing down in 2018 when the developer shuttered before completing the fourth season. Skybound Games came to the rescue, hiring on previous Telltale employees to finish the story as it was originally planned. This finale is a fitting tribute to Clementine and her journey, but it also is inconsistent in quality and suffers from some narrative missteps that are impossible to ignore.

We've watched Clementine grow from a naive girl into a resourceful and hardened warrior. Part of this was thanks to her preparation from Lee, the main character of the first season, who did everything in his power to protect her. This final season puts Clementine in a similar position, as she looks after a child named A.J., who we first met in season two. The exploration of Clementine and A.J.'s relationship is done well; it has the betrayals, zombie hordes, and difficult choices we've come to expect, but A.J. is a wild card. He's still learning what's acceptable in the world around him, and his perception of that is often different from Clementine's.

The season has twists and surprise appearances, and is an intriguing exploration of Clementine's growth as a person because we finally watch her step into a more adult role and see the impact her post-apocalyptic upbringing has had. She's not the same little girl from seven years ago. She's had to relearn to trust, fight to keep her humanity, and take on a parental role. I enjoyed seeing her become to A.J. what Lee was to her, and not many games actually let you grow up with a character the way we have with Clementine.

Since this is the finale and our goodbye to this special character, the season hinges on the conclusion to Clementine's story. Unfortunately, that aspect is disappointing. I won't spoil anything about her ultimate fate, but the narrative approach to it feels forced and not true to the series. Certain facts seem to have been deliberately overlooked to give Clementine the ending the writers wanted, regardless of whether it makes sense within the rules of the world. This is not the kind of thing players should have to overlook in a moment this important for a character they've been invested in for years.

The choices you make influence the dialogue, certain actions A.J. takes, and your relationships. In many cases, you are forced to pick between two characters, whether it's something as simple as who to spend time with or as dire as who to rescue from death. My favorite choices came down to the example I wanted to set; this is all about teaching A.J. how to survive, and at one point, you need to decide whether to take off the training wheels and trust him to make his own decisions. It's a scary moment that captures the plight of a parent.

Some new and creative ways to implement QTEs help keep the action varied. Whether you're activating traps, stunning zombies, or using new weapons such as a bow and arrow to line up headshots, the action sequences give you more options. You also explore a decent number of different locations, including a school and a massive boat. The only frustrations I had dealt with the poor visual cues for knowing where to look or target an enemy, sometimes resulting in unfair fail states just to figure out your cursor needed to be pointed slightly down to attack an enemy's foot instead of their midsection.

Characters also take a frustrating all-or-nothing approach to your actions. For instance, one guy asked me not to kill any zombies. I respected his wishes, stunning a multitude of zombies instead of stabbing them to death, but at the very end I got caught off guard, accidentally pressing the kill button to down one zombie. The sequence ended with the character yelling at me that I didn't even try, which obviously wasn't the case as I avoided all zombies up until that point.

After following Clementine all these years, I look back at some seasons and wonder if they were really necessary. But I'd be lying if I said her ending was completely unfulfilling, even if I had to suspend my disbelief. Seeing Clementine's story end is bittersweet. For anyone who has cared about her fate, it's worth seeing if she can survive the terrible odds or if she's doomed to travel the same path as Lee, but just know that you are likely to come away with mixed feeling. » **Kimberley Wallace**

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Concept**
As Clementine, navigate a dangerous world while teaching a young child how to survive

» **Graphics**
Visuals still aren't a high point, but the characters models have improved. Little touches (like the "game over" screen using the comics' art style) stand out

» **Sound**
Outside of a few unnatural lines, the voice acting is well done and effectively conveys a wide range of emotions

» **Playability**
The controls remain intuitive, but visual cues could be clearer to avoid unfair fail states. The ability to use more weapons adds more variety to the action

» **Entertainment**
After following Clementine for years, her final outing shows how far she has come. Sadly, a major plot hole diminishes the power and satisfaction of this conclusion

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

World War Z

Toppling expectations

8.25

Style 1-Player Shooter (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive, Mad Dog Games LLC **Developer** Saber Interactive **Release** April 16 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Take arguably the best element of the film *World War Z* – the zombies – and adapt them into a cooperative shooter inspired by games like Left 4 Dead

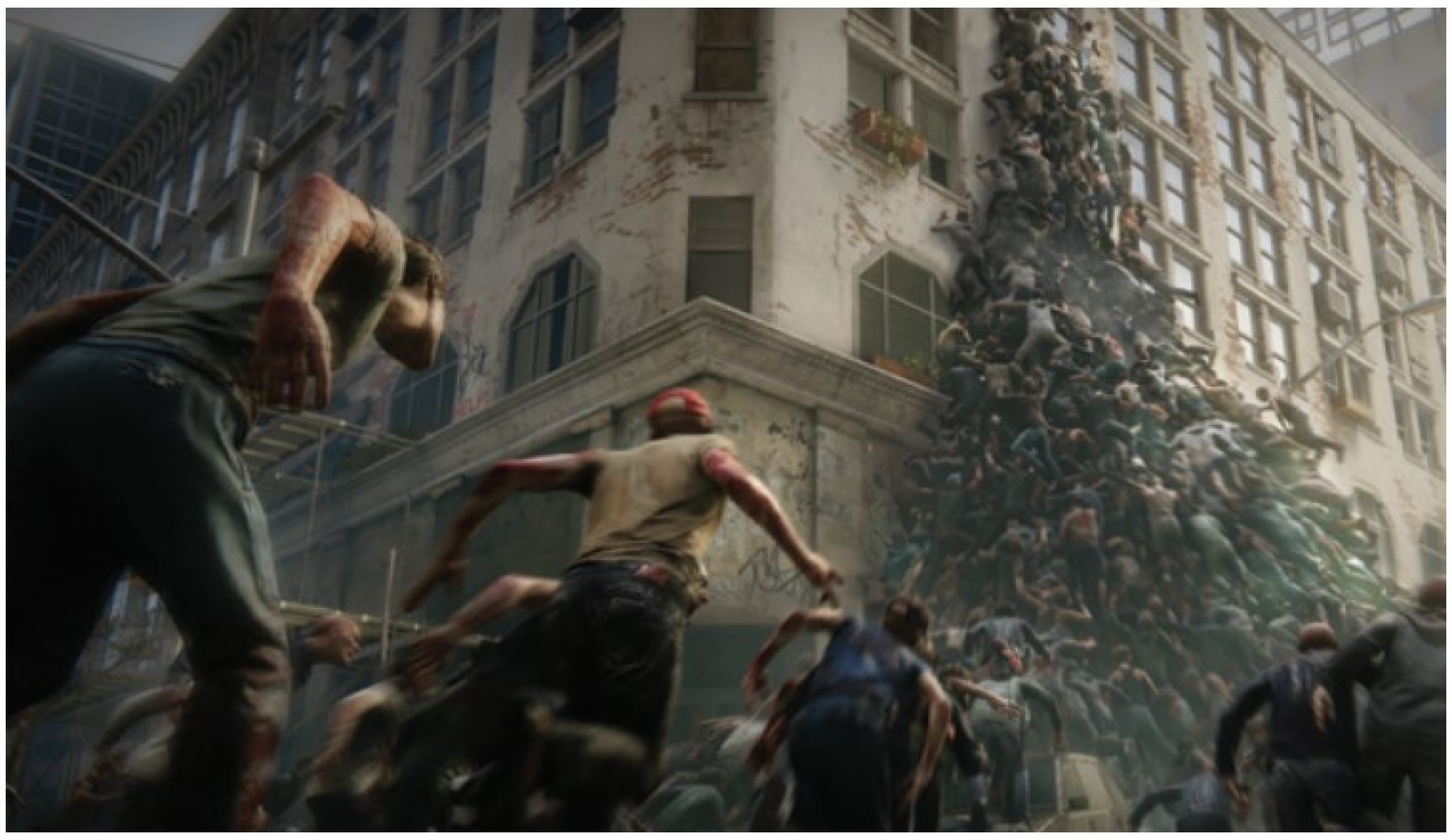
» Graphics
The non-infected player characters are full of detail. Watching the zombie horde descend, even when you're replaying a scenario, is impressive

» Sound
The soundtrack doesn't inspire the intensity it aims for, and the character barks are obnoxious. The performances in the animated short stories are better

» Playability
Moving and shooting feel great, but some quality-of-life elements for non-verbal communication with other players are missing

» Entertainment
World War Z hews closely to the core tenets of the genre, but its zombies make the familiar monster feel unique. The story is interesting, but light enough that it knows when to stay out of the way

» Replay Value
Moderately high



Regardless of how you feel about the movie *World War Z*, you can't deny that the way zombies moved in its world was impressive. They didn't look too different from typical zombies individually, and they ambled and groaned in familiar ways, but when they amass, they climb on top of one another to create giant hills of the undead in order to overcome barriers. It was horrifying to look at and scary to imagine how you would react in that situation. The World War Z video game takes that key element of the film and uses it to create a visually interesting gameplay mechanic that is horrifying to witness but fun to dismantle, creating one of the best Left 4 Dead-inspired games in years.

World War Z is made up of four disconnected cooperative narrative campaigns that take place in different parts of the world. Each has four distinct playable characters, structurally placing it a little closer to the book than the film. You must make your way through linear locations like Japan and New York, fighting for survival while achieving a series of goals together, like opening a door so a train can get through, or getting on a boat before being overtaken by zombies. The story is light, but it provides some interesting context for what you're doing. The narrative touches are quick, but I appreciated that they qualified everything just enough so I was doing a little more than just moving point to point.

You can also find coloring for the narrative outside of the missions and unlock short animated backstories for the characters after playing with them at least once. I like how the story is presented because it lets you absorb only what you're interested in. If you want to just shoot zombies, you can easily bypass everything, but if you want more, it is available.

The third-person shooting feels good, and I didn't encounter slowdown or connectivity issues playing online. Seeing thousands of the undead descend on you from the distance is a common occurrence, and you must often hold down the fort while they scramble and climb on top of one another to get to you. Seeing the undead hills is scary and firing at the base with explosives or even just plain old bullets is always satisfying.

In these situations, when you know the horde is preparing to descend, you have more than just the weapons you scavenged on the way there. You are typically afforded time to set up defenses like barbed wire, electric floor panels, or turrets for some light tower defense. Collaborating with a team (especially on the higher difficulties) to set up defenses and then execute them to hold back the zombies is awesome, and makes replaying the campaigns consistently exciting.

Any character can be any of the six classes, which is good when you find a character you like, or are trying to unlock everyone's backstory. The classes don't feel radically distinct, since everyone scavenges the same weapons. Instead, the class dictates your special item, like a grenade, taser, or a special syringe you can use to boost everyone's health. You level up your class as you play unlocking assorted boosts and equippable passive abilities. It encourages you to find a favorite early and stick with it, which made trying new classes unsatisfying.

Along with the cooperative campaigns, which is the premiere mode, a competitive mode for groups of eight to fight each other is present. This mode offers a change of pace and has some depth with its five sub-modes and 10 classes that can be leveled similarly to the classes in the campaign, but it plays like a mode from a past era. The shooting feels good and pausing a firefight so everyone can take on a sudden horde of zombies is a cool idea, but running around with your team on a small map adapted from the campaign trying to get 50 kills as fast as possible just feels too familiar in the modern age of online shooters.

World War Z is a technically proficient, visually impressive cooperative shooter that surprised me. Licensed games can be hit-or-miss, and the film version of *World War Z* is not the most exciting fictional world, but it supports the experience here well. The core of the story (human reactions to a fully thought-out zombie plague) and the best part of the movie (crazy zombie hills) elevate an engaging cooperative shooting experience into some of the most fun I've had shooting zombies in a while. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Guns level up individually and are different every match, so coming across your favorites (like the explosive crossbow) is exciting

Photographs

Captivating vignettes about regrets

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** EightyEight Games **Developer** EightyEight Games **Release** April 3 **Rating** N/A

We all have moments we regret. Whether these moments are big or small, consequences result either way. Photographs is a narrative puzzle game from the creator of mobile hits 10000000 and You Must Build A Boat that expands on this concept beautifully. It introduces characters who have to live with heartbreaking choices, and we witness their worlds shift during these pivotal junctures in their lives.

Photographs is composed of five unique scenarios that mix puzzles with a character-driven narrative. Every sequence is focused on different characters, and their associated puzzle types are drastically different. One character uses a match-three format, but with the added difficulty of combining items on the board. Another involves sliding puzzles in which two characters move at the same time on a 5x5 grid and must be slotted into different holes to win. As each scenario progresses, the puzzles become more challenging within it, representing the increasingly difficult situations the characters confront. However, they are rarely too hard or obtuse, and the variety means you are never dealing with one type of puzzle for long.

Between the puzzles, Photographs tells stories through short vignettes with voiceover, text, and pictures. Although it has welcoming warm colors, Photographs is cleverly deceiving. The pixelated environments draw you in, but bleakness and despair hide underneath; every story revolves around regret, and each tragic tale feels sincere. The narratives follow a predictable structure by using similar narrative devices to twist the events into chaos, but the experience is less about surprise and more about the fascinating characters and their eventual plights. I won't spoil any specifics, but with multiple endings, I felt I had some agency (albeit limited) in how the tales concluded.

The ending I chose appropriately continued the somber story of an old alchemist without being a complete fix to his problems. Still, parts of it felt shallow. I was happy to see a satisfying conclusion for my character, but I wondered about the other characters I left behind and what became of them. One ending unifies the stories in a creative and gratifying way, but I just wish this was the case for more of them.

What I love most about Photographs is how the stories and gameplay marry to feel like one uniform experience. For example, during a section about a journalist, the puzzle format features aesthetic elements like a marker, erasers, and paper that feel appropriate to the world. You have to successfully draw a path with your marker toward a splotch of ink without being hit by an eraser that deletes your progress.

An overarching mechanic ties everything together with the use of a camera. I enjoyed having to zoom into gorgeous pixelated dioramas that change over time, such as a landscape that deteriorates from a drought. Between story moments and puzzles, you zoom into the diorama to search for a certain object or person with the guidance of a one-word clue. While this basic pixel hunting is seen in a lot of adventure games, Photographs makes it interesting with fantastic visual storytelling, such as zooming into a deadly plant that made a young girl fall ill, or noticing a beat-up vehicle turn into an expensive sports car when a character becomes successful.

My main gripe has to do with the puzzle type involving a girl on a diving team. It presents pinball-like puzzles where you shoot a ball that ricochets off platforms and walls as you attempt to fling it into a pool of water. To shoot the ball, you use a few dials to change the angle of how it's thrown, but the dials were frequently difficult to adjust due to imprecise controls. While this is annoying, it's a minor issue since you have unlimited tries.

Photographs is a beautiful adventure that isn't afraid of tackling difficult themes, and it doesn't come across melodramatic or disingenuous. It isn't a happy game, but there's a lot to love with how it introduces sympathetic characters, worlds that are ripe with detail, and puzzles that bring a satisfying challenge. » **Elise Favis**

8

PC • iOS

» **Concept**
Combine puzzle-solving with a striking narrative about regret and heartbreak

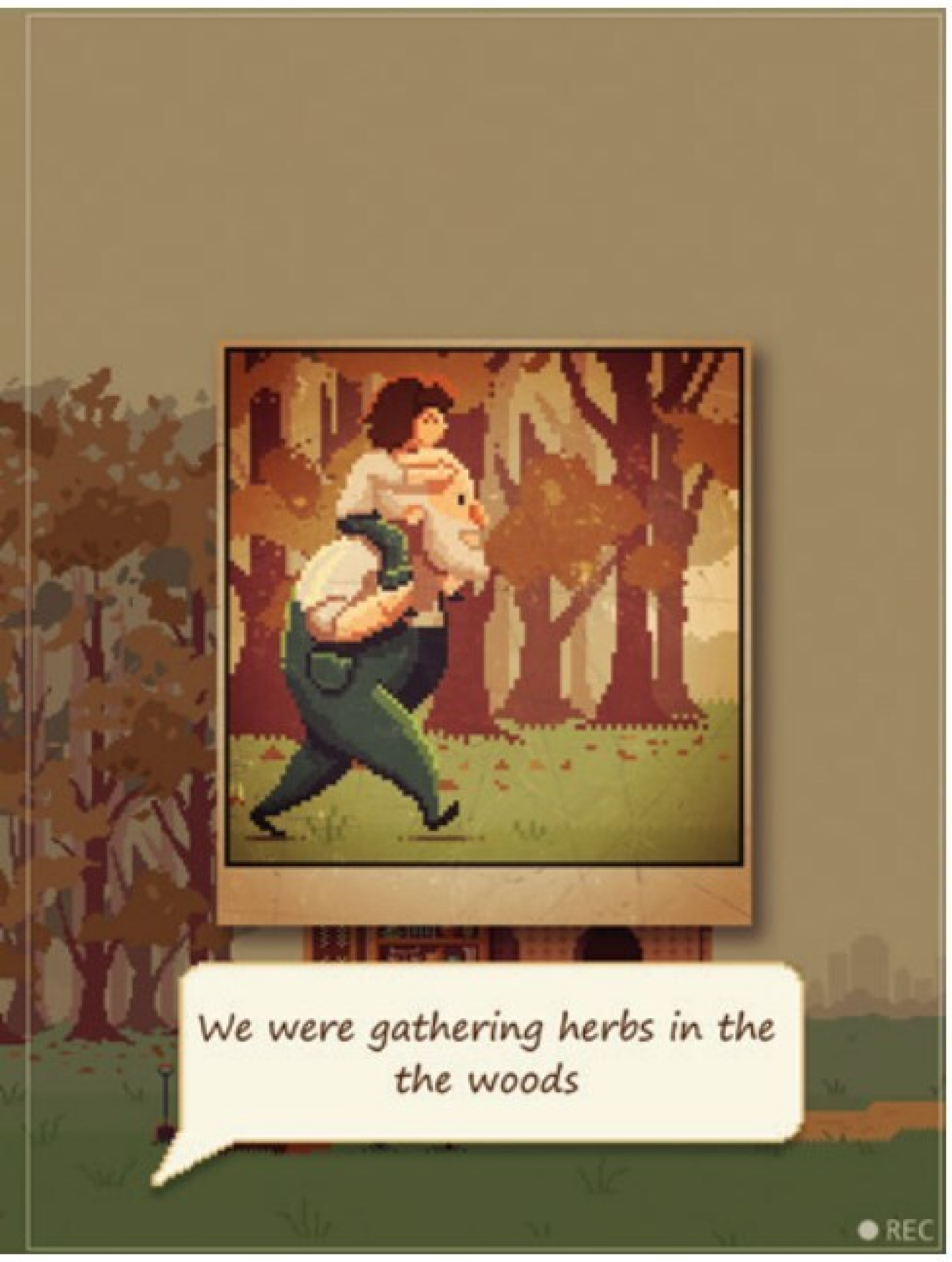
» **Graphics**
The pixelated graphics have a warm aesthetic that contrasts with the dark themes in an unusual but captivating manner

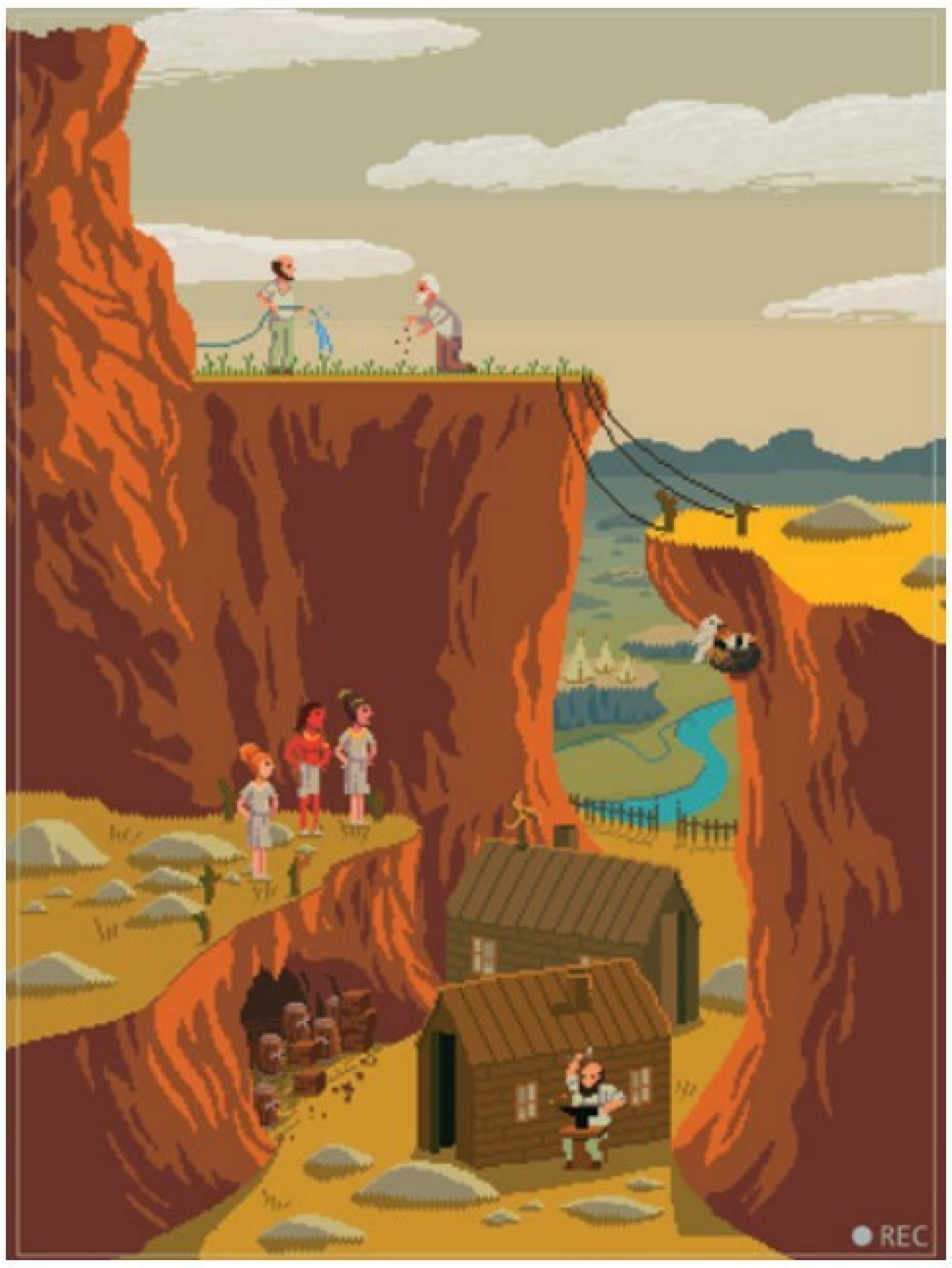
» **Sound**
Excellent music brings a dreamy audio backdrop to the emotional experience

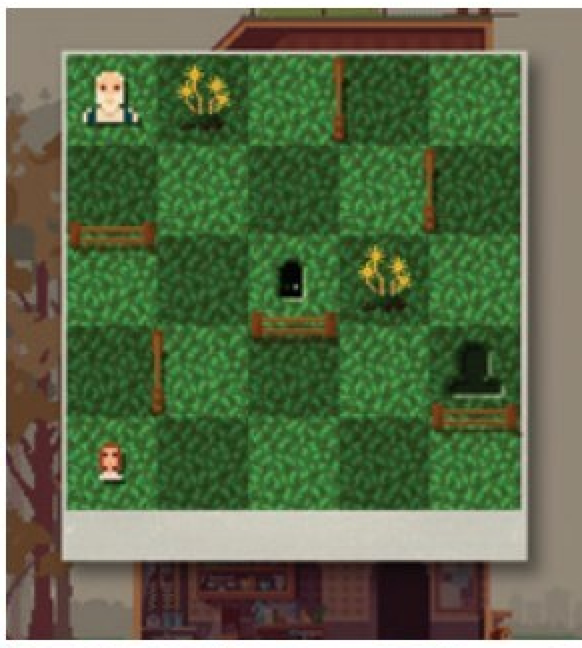
» **Playability**
Despite some imprecise controls, Photographs is well-crafted and accessible even if you don't play puzzle games much

» **Entertainment**
With gripping stories, great puzzles, and a cast of empathetic characters, Photographs is absolutely worth your time

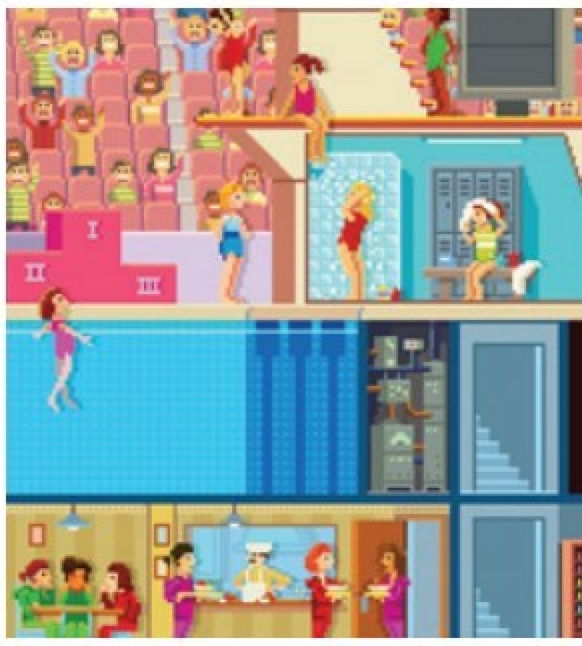
» **Replay Value**
Moderate





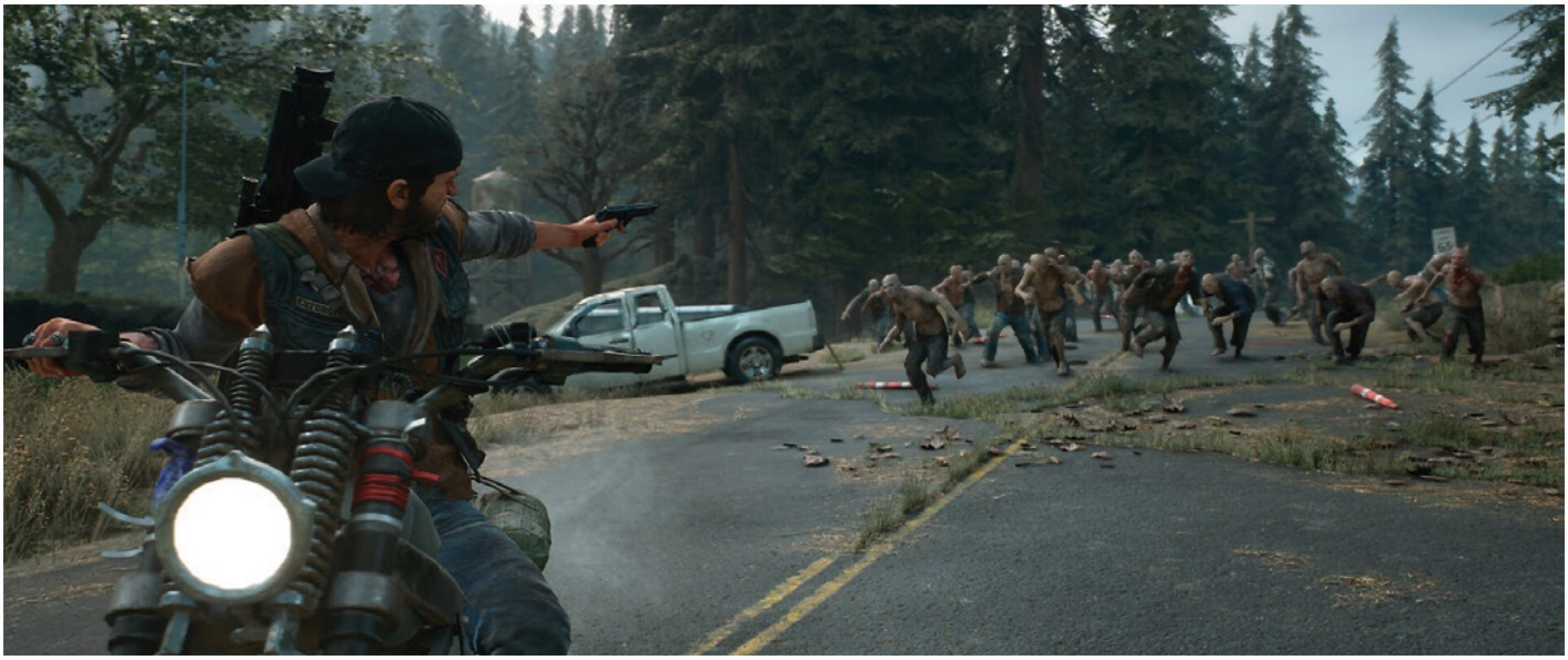


He overslept.



Days Gone

Surviving in a divided world



7.75

PS4

» Concept
Deacon St. John is a drifter in an open world where different embattled groups of survivors fight the zombie hordes and each other

» Graphics
Characters' faces convey a range of emotions, but the framerate is unstable

» Sound
Sam Witwer puts in a good performance as Deacon St. John, and the game's squishy guts and sloshy gas cans provide lots of ambiance

» Playability
Some small things are annoying, like the camera during melee fights leaving you blind (it doesn't affect your performance) and item pickup being finicky. Otherwise the controls are up to the challenge

» Entertainment
Surviving the zombie throngs can be a thrilling experience, but the story and open-world structure come in second

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Bend Studio **Release** April 26 **Rating** M

The pause menu of Days Gone keeps track of the time since Deacon St. John was separated from his wife, Sarah, who was helicoptered away during the chaotic zombie outbreak. Since that day, he's been living a life similar to his old one as a biker, eschewing mandated responsibilities and trusting his own code above all else.

However, no man is an island, and as the remaining human settlements fortify themselves against the zombie hordes and each other, Deacon is more tethered than he first thought. He might not totally buy into the anti-government paranoia, militaristic, nihilistic, or rigid philosophies of those around him, but he's not entirely selfish, either.

Like Deacon, Days Gone sets off on its own path, landing between being a dynamic open world and a linear, physically constrained story. While its gameplay systems create fun and harrowing scenarios, the way Days Gone straddles the line between two extremes leaves me wanting more from both the story and open world.

Resources are scarce in the ruined landscape, affecting almost everything you do. You have to maintain repairs on your bike, you can craft lots of equipment, and your melee weapons break frequently. The situation isn't all grim, however. Days Gone does a good job making you feel desperate but not frustrated, leading to improvisation like making the most of your equipment. If I ran out of ammo for my favorite weapon, I might use a sound emitter to attract zombies to enemies' location. What about the subsequent zombie rush that inevitably follows? That's a problem for another time. Hopefully I have some ammo by then, or maybe I switch to stealth or my crafted melee weapon – a baseball bat modded with a saw blade.

Dealing with hordes – massive gatherings of zombies – is its own tense, terrifying challenge that requires you use more of your environment to survive since you can't simply shoot your way clear of the throng before they tear you apart. You have to use their rage against them, funneling them into choke points where you can set explosives or shoot flammables to take out chunks of them before running away and regrouping. The unpredictable horde A.I. adds intrigue in successive tries since you can't always predict where they're going to go.

You can buy better equipment and some supplies through human camp settlements, but only by earning their trust first by doing missions for them. These tasks, like clearing out a camp of Marauders or PCP-addled human Rippers aren't novel, but Deacon's dealing with the camps and their leadership help define him by juxtaposing him with each camp's views on survival, such as Copeland's anti-government conspiracy mindset. These camps also figure into your open-world activities; when you save survivors in the wild, you earn a big trust boost with the camp you send them to.

Rescuing survivors, hunting, and collecting random plants suggests an open-world structure ripe with possibilities, but Days Gone's landscape is more dull than it appears. The map has a lot of land on it, but it's not filled with intriguing side stories, characters, and situations. Instead, it contains prescribed missions and anonymous people to kill – and these tasks were not tempting or rewarding enough to draw me away from the main story.

Days Gone's narrative is standard and sufficient, but it trips up when it leans on minor characters at multiple points for important and/or dramatic turns in the plot. This strains credulity, makes the world feel too small, and pads out the experience with filler missions using otherwise boring stealth gameplay mechanics. My least favorite was being asked to search for a guy's MP3 player as the story was all coming to a head.

On the technical front it's also worth mentioning that Days Gone lacks polish for a first-party title. The framerate can vary, and the loads are surprisingly long and frequent on the standard PS4 – something that shouldn't be necessary at this stage.

Days Gone has good gameplay foundations. The scarcity of supplies and ever-present threat of zombies put me on edge as much as it gave me options to escape by the skin of my teeth. But the inability to fully deliver on either the story or open world fronts makes it a title of both possibilities and limitations.

» **Matthew Kato**

MLB The Show 19

In the hunt again

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Sony Interactive Entertainment San Diego **Release** March 26 **Rating** E

8.5

PS4

» Concept
A vastly improved product that offers engaging new modes and much-needed fixes to Diamond Dynasty and Road to the Show

» Graphics
You wouldn't think a baseball simulation is deserving of being called "one of the best-looking games out there," but The Show nails the realism

» Sound
Easily the weakest part of this year's entry. If a star player is coming to bat, there's a good chance you are going to hear the same clip repeated game after game. Some talk dives deep into the inner workings of the sport, but the color game needs work

» Playability
You see more realistic outcomes while batting, but this is mostly the same gameplay package from previous years. Infrequent challenges are fun to guess and watch unfold

» Entertainment
Reliving historical moments is a great new way to experience The Show. Diamond Dynasty is also beefed up with more user-friendly card collecting and a variety of ways to play

» Replay Value
High

If a big-market team like the New York Yankees underperforms and misses the playoffs, coaches' heads roll and the roster is replenished with high-priced free agents and top prospects. MLB The Show is coming off a down year in which online stability was an issue and card-collecting became a hassle. This was a rare stumble for a series that has been consistently good. Much like an elite team rebuilding in the offseason, developer Sony San Diego took a good hard look at its product and abandoned ideas that weren't working. The studio also turned to the free-agency market with the hopes of finding a spark in some of the greatest players ever. This flurry of activity paid off; MLB The Show 19 is a return to form that delivers excellent new avenues of play and finds ways to rejuvenate some of its legacy modes in interesting ways.

This series has long celebrated the history of baseball, turning beloved players of yesteryear into highly collectible cards that can be recruited to user-created teams in Diamond Dynasty mode. This year, Sony takes us on a nostalgic tour through the league to highlight why some of these players made the Hall of Fame. Through an awesome new mode called Moments, we're invited to play through the storylines that defined the careers of Babe Ruth, Willie Mays, and more. Our skills are put to the test to see if we can belt the home run Ruth famously called before stepping into the batter's box, and tally Mays' 3,000th hit.

Diamond Dynasty is a vastly improved experience across the board. Little touches like new maps in Conquest go a long way in making the experience feel less about grinding, even though you still have the option to. Big additions like the XP Reward Path and Programs, continually reward you with gold players, packs of cards, and more useful stuff just for hitting small milestones. If you like to grind, the newly structured Team Affinity program gives you great rewards for team specific feats, like playing 250 innings with Red Sox players or winning the World Series in the new offline March to October mode.

Offline progress carries over to Diamond Dynasty, and heavy emphasis is rightfully placed on March to October, another great avenue of play designed to get you through a season quickly (it took me just three days). In this mode, you don't have to fuss with rosters or budgets, and never once play a full nine innings with a team. Instead, you are fast-tracked to the key moments in a season that can affect momentum both for the team and individual players. You may come into a game in the seventh inning down a run, or be asked to finish a no hitter. If you win that game in the seventh, your team catches fire and gains a bump for the simulation – a fitting reward for your efforts.

Once the season is complete, you can transfer your March to October save to Franchise mode for the 2020 season and beyond, another smart choice that lets you continue something you are enjoying. Franchise is the least changed offering in the game, delivering tweaks to contracts and being able to extend player contracts, but not much outside of this. Online Franchise is sadly missing for a second year running.

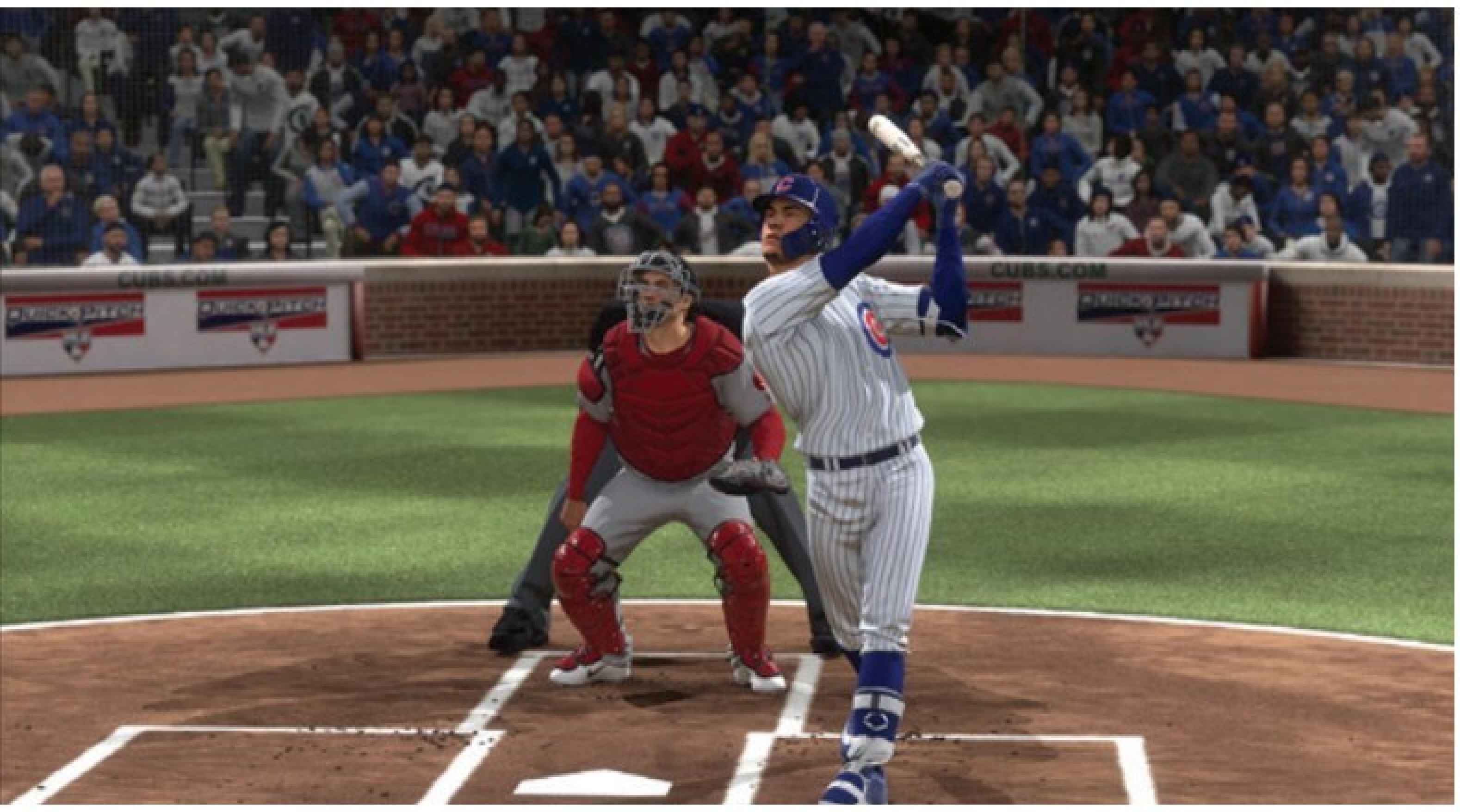
The other series staple, Road to the Show, received a number of significant updates, including personality types. While the banter between players, coaches, and the press in the clubhouse seems trivial and is repeated far too often as your career unfolds, the perks that come from being a Captain, Maverick, Lightning Rod, or the Heart and Soul of the team deliver bumps for your on-field performance. I also like how extra experience is handed out for specific feats in the game, like knocking in a run or only swinging at pitches in the zone.

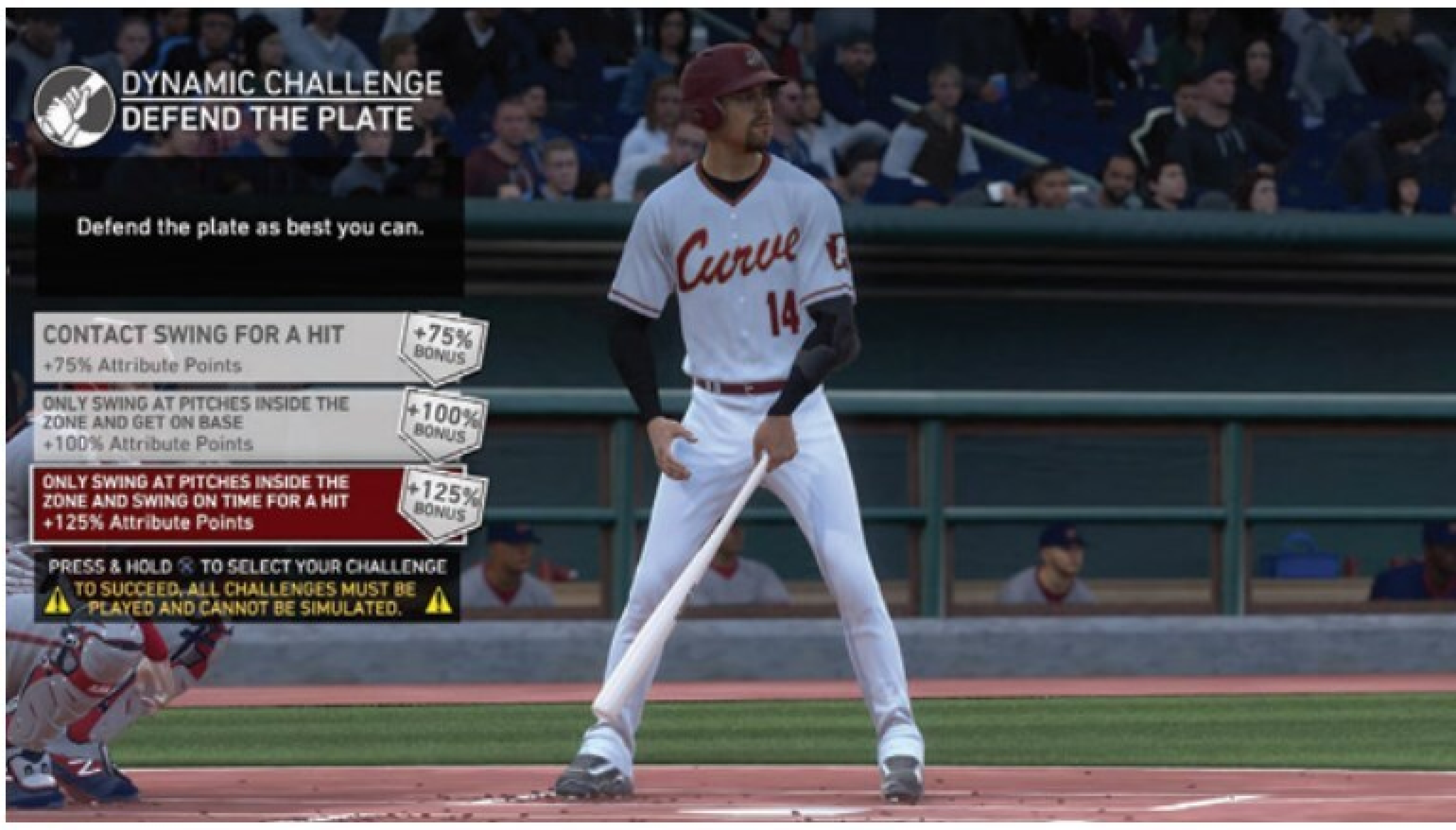
I sound like a broken record for saying this each year, but the Show continues to be an awe-inspiring dynamo on the diamond. I probably shouldn't think a fake throw animation is amazing, but Sony San Diego deserves a tip of the hat for the sheer number of transitional animations, off-play moments, and little touches that are everywhere. Regarding the battles at the plate, pitch speeds seem a bit faster (although pitchers still can't break 100 miles per hour for some reason), and hitting outcomes are more realistic. If you don't put good wood on the ball, you can feel it, perhaps lofting a power swing into short right field for a hit, or bouncing one weakly to second.

Something I couldn't say last year: Online functionality is mostly sound. I ran into a few bouts of light lag while batting and fielding, but the dozen-plus games I played on various networks mostly went off without a hitch. No lost studs or experience. No game results dictated by ridiculous chop.

Thanks to new avenues of play and smart restructuring decisions, MLB The Show 19 is once again a contender that is worthy of your time both offline and on. Iteration has paid off for this series in a big way, and it's nice to see Sony taking chances with new ideas again.

» **Andrew Reiner**




DYNAMIC CHALLENGE
DEFEND THE PLATE
Defend the plate as best you can.
CONTACT SWING FOR A HIT
+75% Attribute Points
+75% BONUS
ONLY SWING AT PITCHES INSIDE THE ZONE AND GET ON BASE
+100% Attribute Points
+100% BONUS
ONLY SWING AT PITCHES INSIDE THE ZONE AND SWING ON TIME FOR A HIT
+125% Attribute Points
+125% BONUS
PRESS & HOLD ⊗ TO SELECT YOUR CHALLENGE
TO SUCCEED, ALL CHALLENGES MUST BE PLAYED AND CANNOT BE SIMULATED.

Earth Defense Force: Iron Rain

Buggy in every way

7

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** D3 Publisher **Developer** Yuke's **Release** April 11 **Rating** T

PS4

» Concept
A new developer gives a slightly different spin on a campy alien invasion

» Graphics
Impressive in the scale achieved, but still rough in enemy movements and how buildings collapse

» Sound
The voice acting is so bad it's good, perfectly fitting the far-fetched story. The soundtrack also complements the game nicely, delivering appropriate tones for the action at hand

» Playability
Obliterating waves of giant creatures is still enjoyable, but more polish is needed for some class-specific actions, vehicles, and the insect mounts

» Entertainment
Iron Rain provides plenty of content, but Yuke's EDF debut doesn't change much

» Replay Value
Moderately high

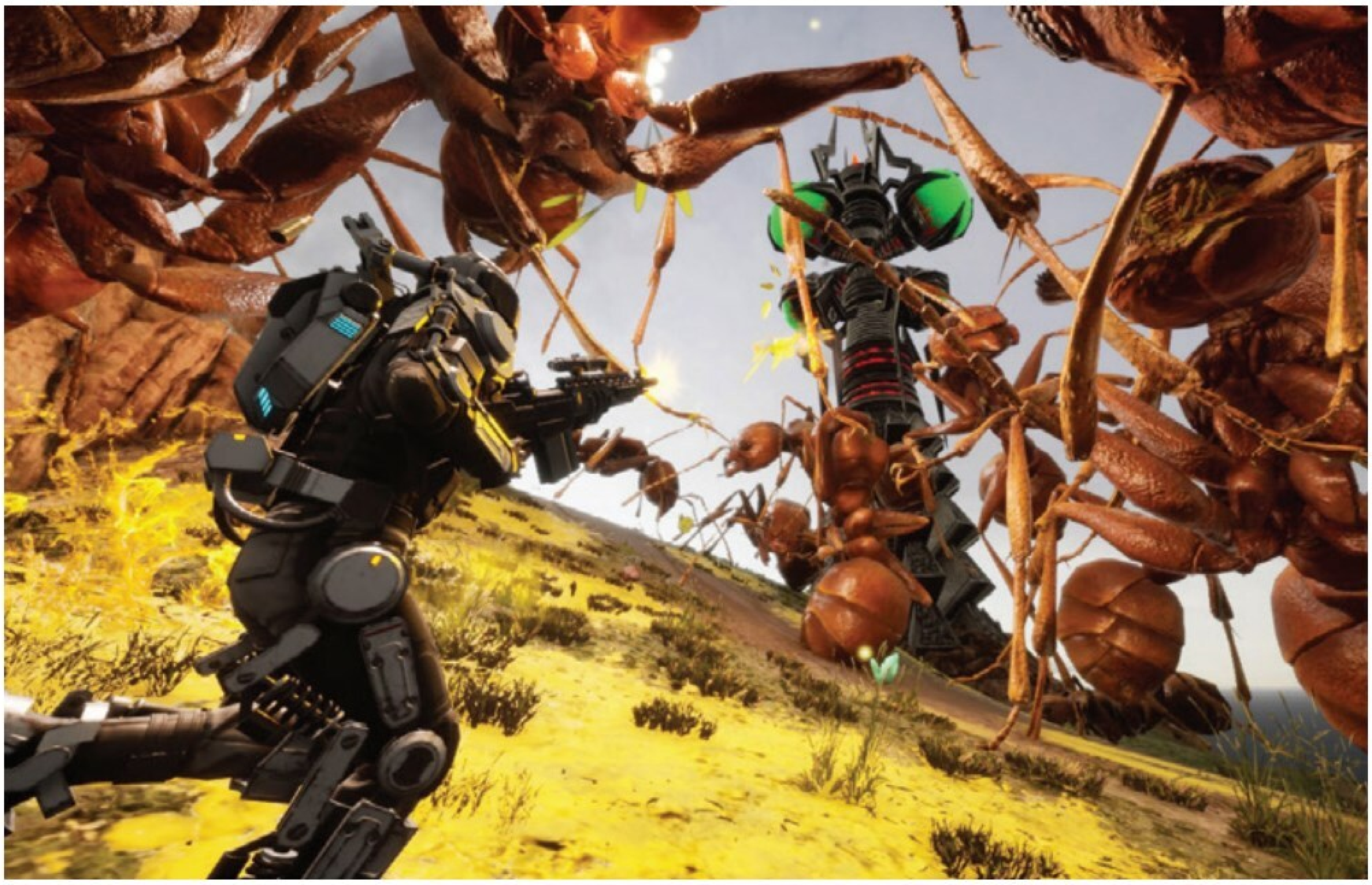
Few video games deliver B-grade camp as well as Earth Defense Force. In any given installment, you can expect to see giant ants scampering up skyscrapers to rain bile on anyone nearby, and skies filled with UFOs that deploy armies of robots, beetles, and even towering Godzilla-like beasts. Since the series' inception, D3 Publisher has treated this goofy formula like an irreplaceable ancient scripture, hesitant to make sweeping changes between entries. As the years have gone by, the novelty of shooting a laser beam at a jumping spider wore off, and the series' run-and-shoot gunplay stagnated to the point of feeling unintentionally retro.

Earth Defense Force: Iron Rain was poised to be the entry that would take the series in new directions. The development reins were passed from series creator Sandlot to Yuke's to tell a story set decades after last December's Earth Defense Force 5.

From a story perspective, Iron Rain lives up to the billing, giving us a look at the evolution war against the "Aggressors." Yuke's humanizes this narrative through the voices of recurring characters who offer deeper insight into the EDF's operations, as well as the world's view of the invasion. While we get more story, don't expect any mind-blowing (or even interesting) revelations. Everything said is of the "Blow them up" and "Is that a giant [insert insect type]?" variety. What the story succeeds in delivering are cheesy characters that are every bit as ridiculous and fun as the concept of insects coming from space.

Even after decades of battling these enemies, the humans still act surprised whenever a ship appears over a city. I laughed at most of their banter, and legitimately looked forward to any time a character tried to rally the troops. If you can believe it, EDF's formula is even more campy than before, and that's a good thing.

Changes also occur on the battlefield, but most of them are a slight step back for the series. Blowing away ants, scorpions, and anything that seems out of place in a city is still the order of the day, but these foes no longer drop loot. They instead leave behind gems in four different colors: green for health, and gold, blue, and red for crafting. When you finish a mission, you automatically unlock blueprints for weapons, vehicles, and cosmetic items. You then learn that constructing a low-end rocket launcher may only require 500 gold gems, but a nice laser rifle will set you back a hefty sum in red and blue gems. As much as I like having the random factor removed from EDF's equation (since you know what weapons you can build and equip at any time), being handed 300 blue crystals at the end of a mission isn't nearly as rewarding as gaining a new turret or missile launcher you can immediately use.



Weapons deliver more attributes to weigh for your loadout. You can see the damage they deliver, ammo count, firing range, reload time, shots per second, blast radius, lock-on time, precision, recoil, and more. You can also pull these weapons into a practice session before entering a mission. You should do this, as some of the weapons function in unexpected ways, such as an assault rifle that fires a "lucky bullet" 1 out of 10 times, and a sniper rifle with ricochet effects. You may not want to use some of these weapons after the test, as reload times and functionality are all over the place.

The new character class, the Prowl Rider, also disappoints. Being able shoot a grapple and zip up to a building top is great when it works, but doesn't always latch onto objects or properly shoot you up to the desired surface. The Prowl Rider's overdrive is also cool in concept – summoning a spider, ant, or scorpion to ride on and use as a weapon – but is difficult to control given how often these critters get stuck on geometry.

Little touches like the increased hit-point capacity being applied to all four character classes are fantastic, and I adore how item weights are different for each class. The standard Trooper can bring more fun toys to play with than the Jet Lifter, which is meant to be light for its flight and swift mobility. Having HP transfer means you can switch classes whenever you want, which helps you adapt to specific mission objectives and complement your co-op partner's style of play.

The running and gunning hasn't changed much, feeling a little clunky in movement and dicey in targeting accuracy, but Yuke's did a nice job of changing up the enemy formations between missions. New critters and dangers are introduced in a number of the 50-plus stages, and getting to battle on the top of a flying aircraft carrier (just like in *The Avengers*) is good fun, and a nice visual chance at the right time. The final boss is a pain that requires some grinding for HP and better gear, but is crazy in design and a worthy last adversary for a game built on ridiculous ideas.

Earth Defense Force: Iron Rain is ultimately more of the same, just seen through a slightly different developer lens. Most of your time is still spent fending off waves of marching ants, which is still somewhat fun in an overly familiar way. » **Andrew Reiner**

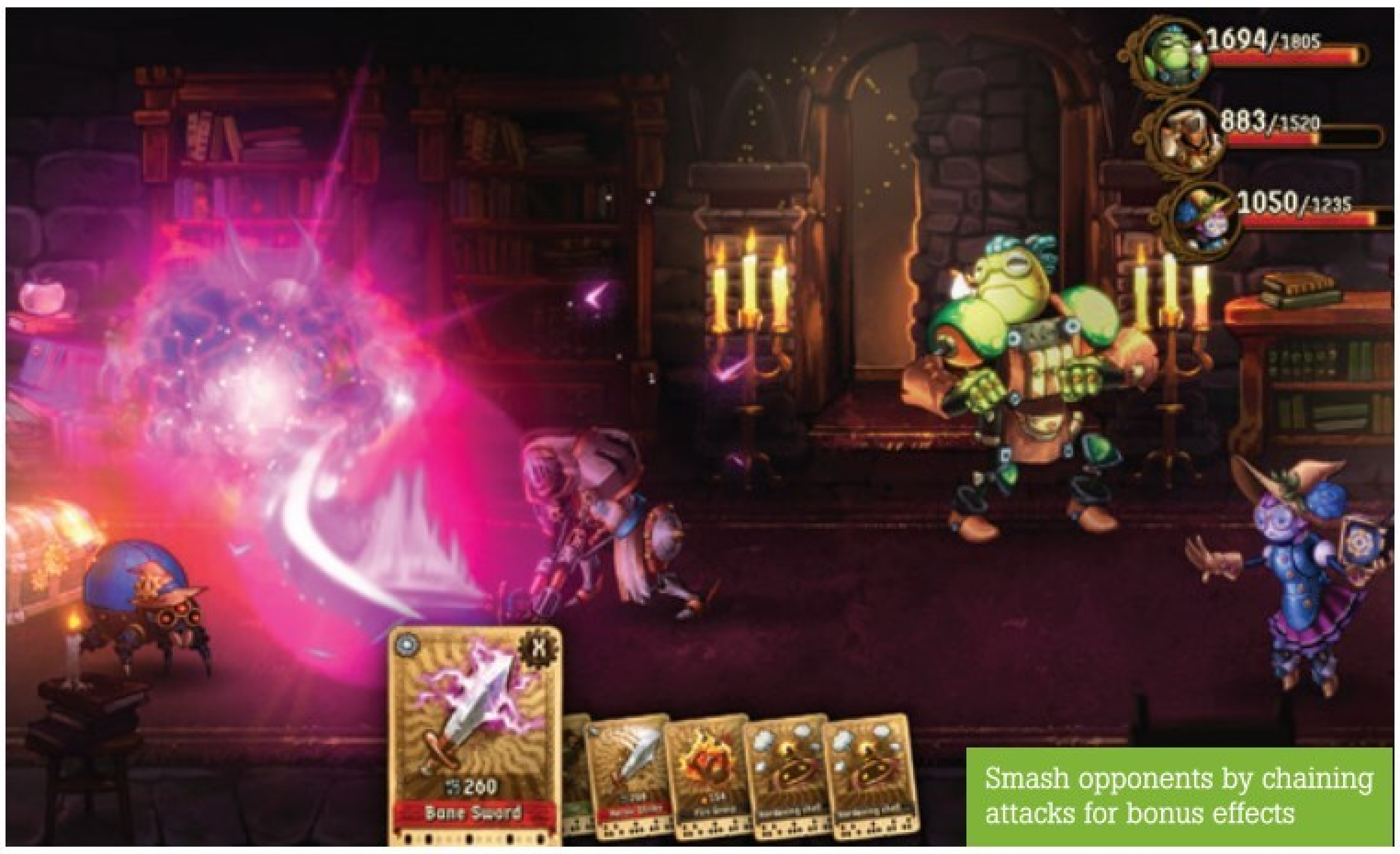
SteamWorld Quest: Hand Of Gilgamech

Streamlined strategic deck-building

Style 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing **Publisher** Thunderful Publishing **Developer** Image & Form **Release** April 25 **Rating** E

The fantasy/steampunk SteamWorld Quest: Hand of Gilgamech offers a streamlined and highly accessible foray into a genre known for complexity and strategy. While this classic, turn-based affair hinges on cards and decks, anyone who's ever leveled up and explored a dungeon has everything they need to jump right in to this adventure. SteamWorld Quest is a colorful and fun (if woefully linear) dive into the new age of deck-building, role-playing fare.

You assemble a team of three characters from a larger pool to take on chapter after chapter of straightforward dungeons and puzzles. With little room for exploration and deviation, the dungeon-crawling does little to impress – but the characters, combat, and cards carry the experience. Deciding who to place in your lineup and what abilities to use forms the core of the decision making, and you have enough options to keep things fresh. Rather than just simply playing an attack or a heal, your cards form ability chains that trigger special moves, employ special combos that work with your other characters, and keep a healthy balance of buffs, debuffs, swings and skills in order to craft the best possible turns. Destroying a chapter boss after selecting the perfect selection of skills is satisfying, even if the trappings surrounding the encounter leave something to be desired.



Smash opponents by chaining attacks for bonus effects

The story is forgettable if you can even be bothered to follow it, but you're free to go back and replay earlier chapters to make sure you don't miss any rare cards. You can also head to an arena with unique challenges and rewards, but most of the game is a straight line with simple puzzles. You may have to grind depending on your difficulty selection to increase your base stats and collect resources for new cards, but it never feels overbearing. Coming up with new ways to use various moves together is refreshing, like creating a sustaining regeneration team, or using powerful abilities that may take a crew member out of commission in exchange for dealing insane damage.

While the environments may lack punch, your crew is a smorgasbord of charm and engaging skill baskets. One of your party members is a blast, bringing a synergy of axes and arcane damage that steals the show with powerful debuffs and devastating attacks. Other characters, like the buff-based robo-frog and mask-swapping samurai, add enough flavor to keep the card-swapping and switching compelling to the end.

Seasoned deck-builders will lament a lack of options for more advanced strategy, like distilling decks down to a few potent cards via card removal, but the game deftly dips into more advanced territory via a few abilities that let you stick cards in your opponent's deck or add special ones to yours. On the flip side, players who enjoy pure RPGs shouldn't feel any trepidation at the card-fueled gears, as it's highly accessible for anyone that enjoys a light-hearted adventure.

SteamWorld Quest plays it too safe to satisfy hardcore card-crawlers, but the campy characters, gratifying combat, and splashy synergies make it an enticing option for those looking for a traditional turn-based RPG that's easy to wade into. » **Daniel Tack**

8

Switch

» **Concept**
Pick the perfect team of adventurers and cards to hunt down a dark presence and the mysterious Necronomicog

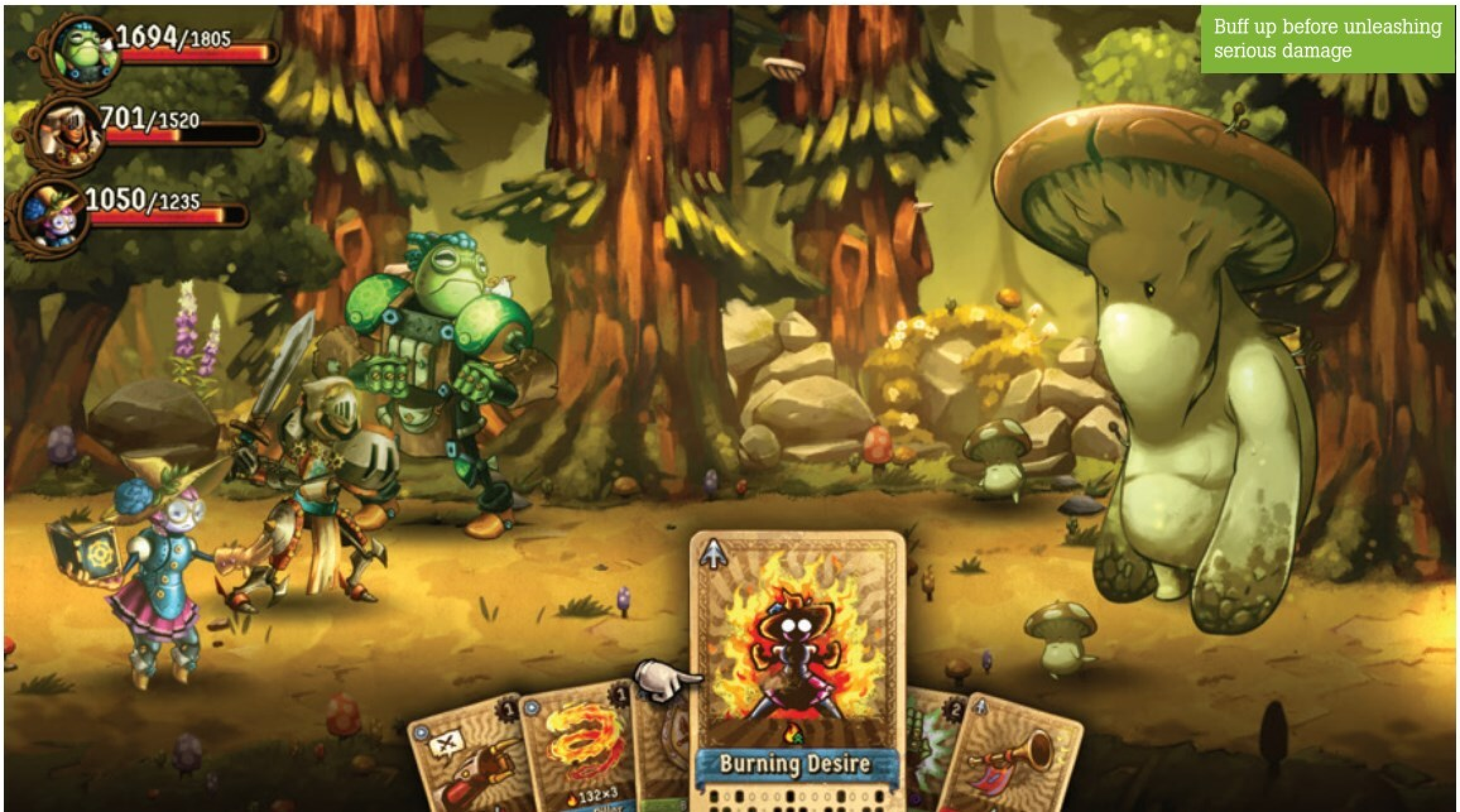
» **Graphics**
The colorful visuals are cute and light-hearted, though many enemy assets are overused

» **Sound**
The music and effects don't stand out, but they're not bad, either

» **Playability**
Easy to pick up and play, with a lengthy onboarding process that makes sure you understand what's going on

» **Entertainment**
Cobbling together the right assortment of cards, combat, and characters is fun. However, shortcomings in progression, story, and complexity create a sterile experience

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



Buff up before unleashing serious damage

7 Baba Is You

Platform Switch • PC
Release March 13 **Rating** E

The core puzzle-solving mechanic in Baba is You is smart, and has the potential to open up puzzles in myriad ways. But when the rules change in each level, it makes the through line to the solution more difficult to find than it should be. **– Kyle Hilliard**

8 Heaven's Vault

Platform PS4 • PC **Release** April 16 **Rating** T

Despite the long travel segments and a handful of bugs, I don't hesitate to recommend Heaven's Vault. The impressive language-learning mechanic largely succeeds, and with a world brimming with detail, it makes this adventure an exciting one. **– Elise Favis**

7.75 Katana Zero

Platform Switch • PC
Release April 18 **Rating** M

When Katana Zero is in top form, it is a satisfying and stylish action/puzzle hybrid that rewards your patience and persistence. But the longer you play, the more the effect diminishes. The assassination scenarios start blending together, and the cutscenes stop inspiring curiosity. **– Joe Juba**

8.5 Hypnospace Outlaw

Platform PC **Release** March 12 **Rating** N/A

In Hypnospace Outlaw, you're one of the moderators who keeps a fictional cyberspace (circa 1999) safe and secure while the rest of us sleep. It can be a tricky job, but navigating and policing this strange world doesn't feel like work thanks to incredibly clever world-building and engaging puzzles. **– Jeff Cork**

5.75 My Time At Portia

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release April 16 **Rating** E10+

As the days go by, My Time at Portia fails to coalesce into a world you want to inhabit. Instead, it gradually grows duller under the burden of repetitive busywork and underwhelming incentives to keep the grind going. **– Joe Juba**

7.5 Mechstermination Force

Platform Switch **Release** April 3 **Rating** E10+

Finally executing on your plan to defeat a boss you've been stuck on is beyond rewarding. Mechstermination Force is action packed and exciting, but hit-or-miss controls and a disappointing final boss prevent it from reaching its best form. **– Brian Shea**

8.5 Operencia: The Stolen Sun

Platform Xbox One • PC **Release** March 29 **Rating** T

Zen Studios has found itself another cozy niche in the video game market, and as always, its enthusiasm for the subject matter shines through. Operencia probably won't be kicking off a massive revival of grid-based dungeon crawlers, but it is a worthy successor to the classics. **– Jeff Marchiafava**

5 Generation Zero

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** March 26 **Rating** T

Frankly speaking, Generation Zero feels unfinished. A massive trail of narrative bread crumbs exists for players that might culminate in a great yarn about this robotic invasion, but the sheer dullness and technical issues makes this game not worth seeing to the halfway point, much less the end. **– Javy Gwaltney**

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PSVR

Beat Saber	9	Feb-19

RIFT

Angry Birds VR: Isle of Pigs	7.25	Apr-19

VIVE

Angry Birds VR: Isle of Pigs	7.25	Apr-19

PS4

Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown	8	Mar-19
Anthem	7	May-19
Apex Legends	9.25	Apr-19
Dead or Alive 6	6.75	May-19
Devil May Cry 5	8.5	May-19
Dirt Rally 2.0	8.75	Apr-19
Division 2, The	9	May-19
Far Cry New Dawn	7	Apr-19
Farm Together	8	Apr-19
Jump Force	6	Apr-19
Kingdom Hearts III	9.5	Mar-19
Lego Movie 2 Videogame, The	6	May-19
Life is Strange 2: Episode 2 – Rules	7	Mar-19
Metro Exodus	8.75	Apr-19
Occupation, The	6.75	May-19
One Piece: World Seeker	8	May-19
Resident Evil 2	9.5	Mar-19
Sekrio: Shadows Die Twice	9	May-19
Trials Rising	7.25	May-19
Vane	6.75	Mar-19

XBOX ONE

Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown	8	Mar-19
Anthem	7	May-19
Apex Legends	9.25	Apr-19
Crackdown 3	6	Apr-19
Dead or Alive 6	6.75	May-19
Devil May Cry 5	8.5	May-19
Dirt Rally 2.0	8.75	Apr-19
Division 2, The	9	May-19
Far Cry New Dawn	7	Apr-19
Farm Together	8	Apr-19
Jump Force	6	Apr-19
Kingdom Hearts III	9.5	Mar-19
Lego Movie 2 Videogame, The	6	May-19
Life is Strange 2: Episode 2 – Rules	7	Mar-19
Metro Exodus	8.75	Apr-19
Occupation, The	6.75	May-19
One Piece: World Seeker	8	May-19
Resident Evil 2	9.5	Mar-19
Sekrio: Shadows Die Twice	9	May-19
Trials Rising	7.25	May-19
Wargroove	9.25	Apr-19

SWITCH

Ape Out	8.25	Apr-19
Bury Me, My Love	8.25	Mar-19
Dead or Alive 6	6.75	May-19
Desert Child	6	Feb-19
Farm Together	8	Apr-19
Lego Movie 2 Videogame, The	6	May-19
New Super Bros. U Deluxe	8.5	Mar-19
Tetris 99	8.5	Apr-19
Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes	8.25	Mar-19
Trials Rising	7.25	May-19
Wandersong	7	Dec-18
Wargroove	9.25	Apr-19
Yoshi's Crafted World	8.25	May-19

PC

Ape Out	8.25	Apr-19
Anthem	7	May-19
Apex Legends	9.25	Apr-19
At the Gates	8	Mar-19
Civilization VI: Gathering Storm	8.75	Apr-19
Crackdown 3	6	Apr-19
Dead or Alive 6	6.75	May-19
Devil May Cry 5	8.5	May-19
Dirt Rally 2.0	8.75	Apr-19
Division 2, The	9	May-19
Eternal Castle Remastered, The	6.5	Mar-19
Far Cry New Dawn	7	Apr-19
Farm Together	8	Apr-19
Jump Force	6	Apr-19
Lego Movie 2 Videogame, The	6	May-19
Life is Strange 2: Episode 2 – Rules	7	Mar-19
Metro Exodus	8.75	Apr-19
Occupation, The	6.75	May-19
One Piece: World Seeker	8	May-19
Resident Evil 2	9.5	Mar-19
Sekrio: Shadows Die Twice	9	May-19
Slay the Spire	9.25	Apr-19
Sunless Skies	8.75	Apr-19
ToeJam & Earl: Back in the Groove	8	May-19
Trials Rising	7.25	May-19
Tropico 6	7.75	May-19
Wargroove	9.25	Apr-19

3DS

Etrian Odyssey Nexus	8	Mar-19
Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story + Bowser Jr.'s Journey	8.5	Mar-19

Game Over Crossword Answer Key:

D	R	E	D	D	■	G	A	S	P	E	■	C	T	F
A	C	H	O	O	■	Y	A	P	A	T	■	A	I	L
I	T	S	A	M	E	M	A	R	I	O	■	S	T	O
■	■	■	■	I	P	R	A	Y	■	■	S	H	A	O
E	S	T	O	N	I	A	■	■	B	E	K	I	N	D
T	H	E	D	O	C	T	O	R	I	S	I	N	■	■
S	O	N	Y	S	■	■	A	B	O	O	M	■	■	■
Y	E	S	S	■	A	E	R	I	S	■	A	C	E	A
■	■	■	S	C	U	M	S	■	■	U	S	R	E	P
■	■	L	E	E	R	O	Y	J	E	N	K	I	N	S
M	I	C	A	S	A	■	■	A	V	A	S	T	Y	E
A	D	D	N	■	■	R	D	R	I	I	■	■	■	■
S	R	T	■	G	E	T	O	V	E	R	H	E	R	E
C	I	V	■	O	S	E	T	I	■	E	L	D	E	R
U	S	S	■	W	A	S	D	S	■	D	R	I	E	R

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Remembering OnLive

The game-streaming service that almost could

Earlier this year at the annual Game Developer's Conference, Google announced Stadia, a streaming platform that proposes high-end PC gaming to anyone with a decent internet connection and a device that can run Chrome. The potential of the technology is alluring, but Google is not the first to sell this vision to gamers. That honor belongs to OnLive. It may not have become the future of gaming, but it came closer than you may think.

by Kyle Hilliard

The Road To OnLive

Steve Perlman has always had his nose in emerging technology. Working at Apple in the late '80s, he developed software-based video compression with Quicktime. Later he started WebTV, which was eventually acquired by Microsoft, placing him in an unsatisfying leadership role. "It's way more fun designing cool new things," Perlman says. So that's what he decided to do. Perlman left and started his incubator, Reardon, and OnLive began to take shape.

With WebTV, Perlman had learned how the internet was hooked up to people's homes, and with his work at Apple, he also had expertise compressing video. These two elements coalesced into the ideas that became OnLive – a game-streaming service that would beam games directly to players' devices. Perlman and his team filed the first patents for their tech in 2002 and worked on it for several years before introducing it to the public at GDC in 2009.

In its public debut, OnLive promised to run high-end games like Crysis over the internet without the need for a high-end machine. The service also allowed players to demo and rent games instantly. To prove they weren't using tricks or hiding a computer somewhere, they set up pedestals with TVs on them to showcase the service. "There were people who were blown away and excited, but…most people didn't believe it," Perlman says. Articles appeared shortly after from reputable sites like *Digital Foundry*, declaring the technology impossible. "You bust your ass for years. You survive the recession. You have all these different challenges and arguably the best technical authority on gaming says the whole thing is fake. [Sighs] Oh well," Perlman says with a laugh. "I felt like a magician trying to prove there was nothing behind the curtain."

Despite the public disbelief, OnLive launched in 2010 with additional services like spectating and the ability to capture "brag clips" of your best gaming moments by pressing dedicated media controls on the controller.

OnLive never landed on a perfect economic model. They looked to World of Warcraft's $15 monthly subscription and sold games individually sharing a 30/70 split with the publishers, but that received pushback. "We had no idea how to price the thing," Perlman says. They experimented with different models, but Perlman says it had the most success charging $10 a month and giving players access to an expanding library of games with the PlayPack. The model did not include new releases initially, but a few new games were eventually added day-and-date as the service expanded.

In the time between Apple and WebTV, Perlman helped create XBAND, a device that let SNES and Genesis players play online together

What Could Have Been

OnLive had a series of potential deals that never quite saw fruition that likely would have put the game streaming service on a different trajectory. OnLive was going to be built into Apple TVs at one time, but when the company experienced major reorganization following Steve Jobs' death, that fell through. Apple also made the decision to block cloud gaming from its app store, which put a stop to OnLive's tablet app. One of the strangest "what if?" scenarios comes from Sony Electronics, who had plans to integrate OnLive into its TVs and Blu-ray players. "Why not? It added no cost to the TV at all, right? It already had the ability to decompress video," says OnLive founder Steve Perlman. But when the Sony Interactive Entertainment got wind of the deal, the deal collapsed. "It was like milliseconds. Sony removed it," Perlman says with a laugh. "It came down hard from the PlayStation group. 'You are not going to be supporting a cloud-gaming system on our TVs that could potentially compete with the PlayStation'."

The End Of OnLive

When OnLive launched, early critics said muddy visuals and noticeable lag hindered gameplay, though the service improved over time. However, the game library had shortcomings that made it hard for people to abandon their current gaming platforms, with no first-party games to lure an audience and major publishers like EA and Activision being noticeably absent.

Despite those issues, Perlman primarily attributes OnLive's failure to a deal with HP that fell through. OnLive was in acquisition talks with HP, which was primarily interested in the OnLive Desktop Plus iPad app that gave tablet users access to a cloud-based Windows desktop packed with productivity software. "If you can make a video game work, you could make anything work," Perlman says. They were in the process of moving the names of OnLive employees over to HP's systems when the deal inexplicably collapsed. "If it had been a successful acquisition, history would have been different. They were going to get behind the service. It was going to be broad-based expansion of cloud gaming," Perlman says.

It wasn't until later that Perlman and the rest of the world learned HP was in the middle of a problematic acquisition of a company called Autonomy, an ongoing crisis that has involved the U.K. Serious Fraud Office and the U.S. Justice Department. "We had a month of cash left in the bridge loan they gave us," Perlman says when HP dropped the deal. "We were shocked, angry." With the rug pulled out from under them, OnLive had to resort to an Assignment for Benefit of Creditors (ABC), which is similar to bankruptcy. In 2012 the company was purchased for $4.8 million by Gary Lauder and he rebooted OnLive, but it was too late. The company's reputation was irreparably harmed, and it was never able gain momentum.

In 2015, OnLive discontinued its services and the company closed, selling its streaming patents to Sony for an undisclosed sum. This unceremonious ending was a far cry from the $380 million Sony paid to acquire competing streaming company Gaikai, which became the foundation for PlayStation Now.

Despite the stuttered trajectory and ultimate failure of OnLive, Perlman is genuinely excited about the future potential of cloud gaming. He sees OnLive as proof of concept that it could work. "I want cloud gaming to succeed really badly," Perlman says. "It would have been nice if we could do it with OnLive, but sometimes that's the way life is. But that doesn't mean the vision should die."

OnLive
OnLive
OnLive
OnLive
GAMES ON DEMAND.
OnLive

OnLive made its kiosks at GDC 2009 purposefully skinny so no one would assume it was hiding computers or consoles

Video Game Greetings

Who says playing games is a waste of time? Put your years of knowledge to the test with our challenging video game–themed crossword puzzle. If you get stuck, you can find the answer key on page 93 – we won't tell anyone you cheated! ***by Jeff Marchiafava***

1	2	3	4	5	■	6	7	8	9	10	■	11	12	13
14					■	15					■	16		
17					18						■	19		
■	■	■	■	20					■	■	21			
22	23	24	25				■	■	26	27				
28							29	30					■	■
31					■	■	32					■	■	■
33				■	34	35				■	36	37	38	39
■	■	■	40	41				■	■	42				
■	■	43						44	45					
46	47					■	■	48						
49				■	■	50	51				■	■	■	■
52			■	53	54						55	56	57	58
59			■	60					■	61				
62			■	63					■	64				

ACROSS

1 Sci-fi judge, jury, and executioner

6 A Quebec peninsula that may surprise you?

11 Classic object-nabbing MP mode

14 "Bless you" preceder

15 What boring NPCs do to you

16 Have a green health bar?

17 *Italian plumber's greeting

19 Captain Kirk's fav MP game?

20 What this author does before playing Dark Souls

21 Mortal Kombat II boss ___ Kahn

22 Setting of Battlefield 1's Albion map

26 Rewind advice that applies to online gaming too

28 *Merciful greeting for many Overwatch players

31 What the PS4 and Vita are

32 What most TNT-toting foes end with?

33 Match-winning exclamation?

34 Ill-fated Final Fantasy VII character, sometimes

36 A cure for everything, if you can spare a pan?

40 What a save file cheater does often

42 GTA's Thomas Stubbs III occupation

43 *Greeting and name of infamous WoW player

46 Half a warm Spanish welcome

48 Pirate speak for "Listen up!"

49 1st course for a number muncher, perhaps

50 Rockstar's latest open-world opus, for short

52 Fast Forza auto

53 *Scorpion's greeting to a longtime friend...or foe

59 "One More Turn" series: Abbr.

60 Light-based quest for alien lifeforms: Abbr.

61 Adjective for some scrolls

62 19-Across ship initials

63 Standard keyboard control schemes

64 What most enemies are compared to Murlocs?

DOWN

1 With a Japanese sword, it becomes a Romero letdown

2 Popular amusement park sim

3 Canadian add-ons

4 Most-wanted fighting series?: Abbr.

5 Game for Arthur Morgan

6 Competitive Pikachu, perhaps

7 Call of Duty's budget, or Chibi-Robo's battery size?

8 Rogue class characteristic

9 ___ Gow Poker

10 Magic kingdom in Gravity Rush 2 that sounds a bit like ancient Tokyo

11 Licensed game pejorative

12 Destiny class, or just a really big baddy

13 Swarming Halo foes, with "The"

18 Fortnite father?

21 Many Rainbow 6 operatives, and enemies, wear them

22 Place to buy custom gamer gear

23 Goomba's ___: Odd Super Mario power-up

24 What all games hope to get

25 Like Assassin's Creed's latest adventure?

26 Many games tuck them in a lore tab

27 Skyrim spin-off, briefly

29 Like a rower who doesn't respect personal boundaries?

30 Baseball series since '87

34 Rare loot drop highlight, perhaps

35 Like 2013's DmC Dante

37 Attack that deals big extra dmg

38 Start to a rhyme a Khajiit may not appreciate

39 Place to carry out 20-Across

41 Annual tech-oriented expo

42 Like a bad episode of Replay?

43 What most play their games on, briefly

44 Early pinball/video game pioneer Eugene ___

45 Jacob Frye's Syndicate sis

46 Bless Online race, or manly "line" lead-in

47 First name of Heimdall actor in the Thor movies

50 Most minimaps display them: Abbr.

51 24-hour bargain, briefly

53 Shorthand for a big Sony exclusive, and a Microsoft one too!

54 Video game advocacy grp.

55 Class of 28-Across speaker: Abbr.

56 Ship-turned-robot lady in the Mass Effect series

57 Hutt Henchman ___-Yees

58 Miss a ledge in a platformer, say

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